Case Study

# Urja Trust

A deep dive into the journey, organisational structure, service model, and population supported by Urja Trust, with reflections on its impact and key lessons learnt



# Urja Trust



| | |
|---|---|
| **City** | Mumbai |
| **District** | Mumbai, Mumbai Suburban, Maharashtra |
| **Country** | India |
| **Region** | South Asia |



> **Urja Trust focuses on both immediate crisis response and long-term recovery.**

## Organisational profile

| | |
|---|---|
| **Team size** | Medium (51-100 people) |
| **Age of organisation** | 10+ years |

## Key aspects of our work

| | |
|---|---|
| **Primary contextual issue** | Homelessness, Mental Health, Gender and Structural Violence |
| **Life stage** | Adults(18-35) |
| **Gender focus** | Young women |
| **Level of intervention** | Continuum of care(All) |
| **Annual Reach** | 550+ people |

## Contextual issue

In India, **nearly 450–500 million women belong to historically oppressed and marginalised communities,** facing caste discrimination, poverty, systemic inequality, patriarchy, and gender-based violence. **Many young women experience discrimination, violence, and sexual abuse from an early age, including domestic violence, trafficking, structural violence, family rejection, and economic deprivation, increasing vulnerability to homelessness, exploitation, and long-term social exclusion.**

Many are forced to leave unsafe homes and migrate to cities in search of safety and survival, often without resources, identity documents, or support networks. Each year, **URJA Trust supports more than 300 marginalised young women survivors arriving in Mumbai**, seeking safety and opportunities to rebuild their lives. Without secure shelter and support, they face unsafe living conditions, hunger, trafficking, repeated violence, sexual abuse, exploitation, unemployment, and severe emotional distress, affecting their physical and mental wellbeing and ability to regain stability.

The main gap is limited access to safe shelter, housing, trauma-informed mental healthcare, legal protection, dignified livelihoods, and civil entitlements, particularly for young women whose experiences and needs remain largely invisible in official data, policy, and planning. These gaps are compounded by limited resources and inadequate responsiveness within existing support systems. Consequently, many remain caught in cycles of violence, homelessness, poverty, and exclusion, with limited pathways towards recovery and dignified, independent lives.

## Objectives

**URJA Trust aims to address the intersecting challenges of gender-based violence, homelessness, poverty, and social exclusion faced by marginalised young women survivors through a holistic, survivor-centred, trauma-informed, rights-based, and participatory approach.** It enables pathways to safety, wellbeing, and social inclusion through safe shelter, holistic healthcare, mental health and wellbeing support, legal assistance, civil entitlements, education, and dignified livelihood opportunities.

Recognising that women's rights and agency are shaped by wider social and institutional conditions, **URJA Trust responds to crises while creating pathways towards wellbeing and independence.** It works with communities and government institutions to strengthen access to safety, opportunities, justice, and entitlements. URJA advances prevention, improves institutional responses, and promotes inclusive, accountable, and responsive systems through dialogue, training, research, government collaboration, community engagement, awareness sessions, and campaigns. These efforts contribute to social and institutional systems rooted in dignity, equity, justice, and belonging.

## Journey




### WHEN?

**When was the organisation established?**
Urja Trust was established on 1st April 2012 and formally registered on 7th August 2014.



### WHERE?

**Where did the organisation start implementing its activities?**
URJA Trust began in Mumbai, expanding to suburban regions to provide shelter, care, livelihoods, and legal protection for survivors across India, while partnering with NGOs, women's groups, government, and justice institutions.



### WHY?

**Why did the organisation start its activities?**
URJA Trust emerged from the founder's lived experience of gender-based violence, caste oppression, exclusion, and poverty, with a commitment to address systemic injustices denying marginalised young women safety, wellbeing, and dignity.



### WHAT?

**What did the organisation do in its initial stages?**
It was founded to respond to homelessness among young women survivors of violence, recognising its roots in gender, caste oppression, mental distress, and systemic injustice that deny safety, entitlements, and dignity.



### WHO?

**Who started the organisation?**
Deepali Vandana, a grassroots social activist, and Altaf Shaikh, a behavioural scientist, started Urja Trust after 12 years working together and witnessing gaps in safety, justice, and wellbeing for homeless young women.



### HOW?

**How was the organisation's work started?**
The work began with the founders' professional experience and personal investment, supported by a small caregiving team, volunteers, NGO partnerships, and funding partners, evolving into structured systems and community engagement.

## Governance & finance

### Organisational structure

**Urja Trust is led by the Managing Trustee, with experience spanning grassroots engagement, gender and social justice, and mental health. Its work is organised across four areas:**

- Survivor-centred interventions Research and Advocacy
- Partnerships and Awareness
- Organisational operations

**Decision-making is done by:**

- Managing Trustee
- Co-founders
- Board of Trustees
- Programme leadership
- Advisory members

**While programme-level decisions involve social workers and young women survivors, ensuring survivor-centred approaches grounded in equity, justice, and compassion.**

### Financial management

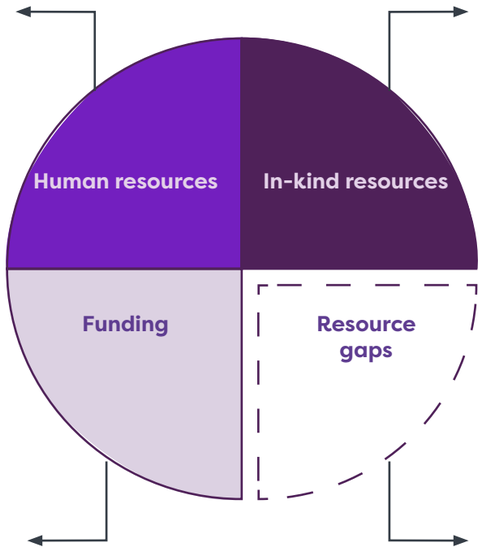
**Urja Trust manages its resources through a centralised financial and administrative system** overseen by the Managing Trustee, finance personnel, and monitoring, evaluation, and operations teams. Clear systems guide budgeting, approvals, procurement, expense tracking, reporting, and programme implementation. **Annual programme planning, budgeting, and forecasting are aligned with organisational priorities and survivor-centred interventions,** while regular expenditure reviews ensure accountable and efficient use of resources. Quarterly financial reviews and annual forecasting support adaptive planning, resource allocation, and long-term sustainability.

**Financial management complies with Indian regulations for non-profit organisations**, including statutory registrations, audited financial records, donor compliance, utilisation tracking, and timely tax and statutory filings. The organisation holds NGO Darpan, CSR, FCRA, 12A, and 80G compliances and regularly submits reports to the Charity Commissioner, Income Tax Department, Ministry of Home Affairs, and Department of Women and Child Development. **Transparent accounting practices, external audits, and internal review systems ensure accountability and ethical resource use.**

## Resources

*Urja Trust has 53 paid staff members, including social workers, psychologists, health attendants, shelter attendants, paralegal social workers, lawyers, and physical trainers, 6 trained community workers, and 7 operations staff covering finance, monitoring and evaluation, fundraising, HR, and administration. The organisation also engages student and professional volunteers.*

*Urja Trust operates with an annual budget of approximately USD 364,000, supported through a mix of grants, CSR partnerships, philanthropy, foundations, and institutional funding. To scale its survivor-centred interventions, expand services, and strengthen systems-level advocacy and geographic reach, the organisation would require an annual budget of approximately USD 624,000.*




*Urja Trust benefits from in-kind contributions including food grains, participant essentials, toiletries, stationery, hygiene supplies, furniture, and educational materials. The organisation also receives pro bono support from legal experts and trainers, and collaborates with partner institutions that provide access to vocational training and employment opportunities.*

*Urja Trust faces key gaps for core and programme staff, administration, compliance costs, and evidence-building research grants. High rent and operational expenses in Mumbai limit expansion. Additional gaps include limited resources for capacity building, monitoring and evaluation systems, digital technology infrastructure, communication and impact materials, and staff wellbeing, constraining scalable advocacy and sustained survivor-centred support.*

## Model & activities

### Target population

**Urja Trust works with young women survivors aged 18–35 years who have been pushed to the margins by gender-based and structural violence in Mumbai, India.** Many arrive from across India after escaping domestic violence, child or forced marriage, caste oppression, trafficking, abandonment, and extreme poverty, often surviving homelessness, unsafe streets, and exploitative labour conditions.

**Many survivors experience anxiety, depression, trauma, emotional distress, social isolation, and insecurity** linked to prolonged violence, displacement, homelessness, and unsafe living and working conditions.



### Services or interventions



**Urja Trust is rooted in a trauma-informed, participatory, and rights-based intervention that supports young women survivors of gender-based and structural violence through the following integrated three-pronged approach, which ensures survivors are visible and supported:**

**Survivor-Centred Interventions:** Urja identifies and supports vulnerable young women through railway station outreach, referrals, walk-ins, alumni survivors, social media, and a helpline. Outreach teams provide immediate protection to those at risk of trafficking, violence, homelessness, and exploitation.

**Survivors receive personalised rehabilitation**, including safe shelter, trauma-informed counselling, expressive arts therapies, healthcare, and referrals for specialised medical and psychological services. **Holistic support addresses physical and emotional recovery**, strengthening resilience, self-confidence, wellbeing, and coping skills.

**Urja also helps survivors obtain legal identity documents**, enabling access to healthcare, education, social protection, and legal rights, while providing legal aid to pursue justice.
**To promote long-term independence**, the organisation supports survivors through education, vocational training, entrepreneurship, digital and financial literacy, mentorship, and employment linkages. **These interventions strengthen economic self-reliance, reduce vulnerability to exploitation, and support sustainable social reintegration with dignity and agency.**

**Systems-Collaborative Interventions:** Urja **builds partnerships** with government ministries and departments, police, the judiciary, shelter homes, healthcare institutions, the private sector, and other stakeholders **through participatory research, policy engagement, implementation partnerships, consultations, and capacity-building initiatives.** Training focuses on laws and policies, gender, intersectionality, power dynamics, mental health, and trauma-informed, survivor-centred approaches. Urja also contributes to policy analysis, implementation guidance, and committee-level participation, helping strengthen coordinated responses and improve survivors' access to justice.

**Community-Participatory Interventions:** Urja works with community stakeholders through expressive arts, awareness sessions, campaigns, workshops, and dialogues on **gender-based violence, homelessness, mental health, wellbeing, and women's economic participation.** Urja also works with male youth, adolescents, employers, and self-help groups **to challenge patriarchal norms and promote gender equity.** In addition, it builds networks with CBOs, CSOs, and women's alliances **to strengthen collective action and amplify marginalised voices.**

## Impact

### Key desired outcomes




Young women survivors experience improved safety and wellbeing, reclaim identity, entitlements, and economic independence, breaking cycles of violence and homelessness.




Communities foster empathy, reduce mental health stigma, strengthen collective responsibility, and promote gender-responsive behaviours, creating safer environments for survivors.




Systems become inclusive, responsive, and accountable, ensuring that marginalised young women survivors access safety, justice, entitlements, and opportunities with dignity.

### Methods

- **Urja Trust uses a mixed-methods approach to monitoring and evaluation**, combining quantitative data (such as case records, referrals, attendance, service tracking, and stakeholder participation) with qualitative information, including assessments, case notes, survivor narratives, observations, feedback, and programme reports.
- **Data is collected by frontline staff**, including outreach workers, social workers, counsellors, and coordinators through regular activities.
- **Information is recorded both manually and digitally through AppSheet systems.**
- **Regular reviews support programme learning, outcome tracking, reporting, resource allocation, and strategic decision-making.**

### Information systems

- Urja Trust uses a **mix of paper-based and digital systems** to document its work with survivors.
- **Frontline teams maintain case registers, attendance sheets, referral notes, field observations, and case narratives.** These paper-based systems are easy to use in the field and in local languages but can be time-consuming, rely on individual recording practices, and lead to gaps or inconsistencies in information.
- **Some programme data is also entered through AppSheet in the field.** While this helps in organising information and tracking work, challenges such as lack of sufficient devices, internet access, and familiarity with digital tools still exist.

### Reflections on impact so far

**Over the past 12 years, URJA Trust has intentionally contributed to a shift from addressing immediate survival situations to advancing structural approaches. It has supported more than 3,000 young women survivors of gender-based and structural violence, enabling access to safety, mental health care, legal protection, civil entitlements, and economic opportunities.** Many have moved towards greater stability, confidence, and independence, with several survivors continuing as alumni and peer supporters, while others have become community workers and URJA employees.

Through government collaboration, policy advocacy, and participation in decision-making spaces, **URJA has trained more than 2,040 government officers, strengthening responses to gender-based violence, survivor-centred institutional processes, coordination, and accountability.**

With active community engagement, **URJA has reached more than 5,000 stakeholders, well-wishers, and changemakers, challenging stigma around gender-based violence and mental health.** Campaigns and dialogue have shifted perceptions towards collective responsibility, creating greater space for survivors' voices, dignity, and agency.

## Learnings

### Strengths or drivers

Rooted in the founder's lived experience, URJA is driven by a commitment to representation, dignity, and structural change. This shapes its survivor-centred, trauma-informed approach, integrating psychosocial care, legal support, economic empowerment, and safe shelter. By centring survivors' journeys of healing and agency, URJA amplifies marginalised women's voices and builds collective action. Its expertise and trusted partnerships with government, communities, and survivor networks enable this approach to influence systems and create sustained social change.

### Limitations

URJA Trust's limitations relate to organisational capacity, specialised expertise, and infrastructure. As an organisation rooted in and led by people from marginalised communities, attracting and retaining specialised professionals can be challenging, particularly when competing with larger organisations offering greater resources. Limited and short-term funding affects investment in data and technology, staff development, social security, and organisational systems. Rented shelter premises limit infrastructure investment and opportunities to deepen the work.

### Challenges

URJA operates within an unequal development ecosystem where resources, funding, networks, and social capital are not fairly distributed. Holistic rehabilitation demands sustained investment across safety, mental health, legal support, livelihoods, and social reintegration, yet grassroots organisations working with marginalised communities often have less access to flexible capital and influence. Rising and complex needs, frontline risks, and a challenging socio-political environment further demand continuous adaptation, collective resilience, and organisational preparedness.

### Opportunities

Growing public awareness of gender-based violence, mental health, and women's entitlements is creating greater space for rights-based approaches, policy engagement, and improved access to services. Emerging survivor-led movements further enable peer support, collective advocacy, and leadership among young women survivors. Expanding funding ecosystems are also opening opportunities for more equitable partnerships.
At the leadership level, Deepali's work advances Dalit feminist perspectives, strengthening representation and challenging structural inequalities within gender justice movements.



# Partnership Journey with Ember

## Initial assessment

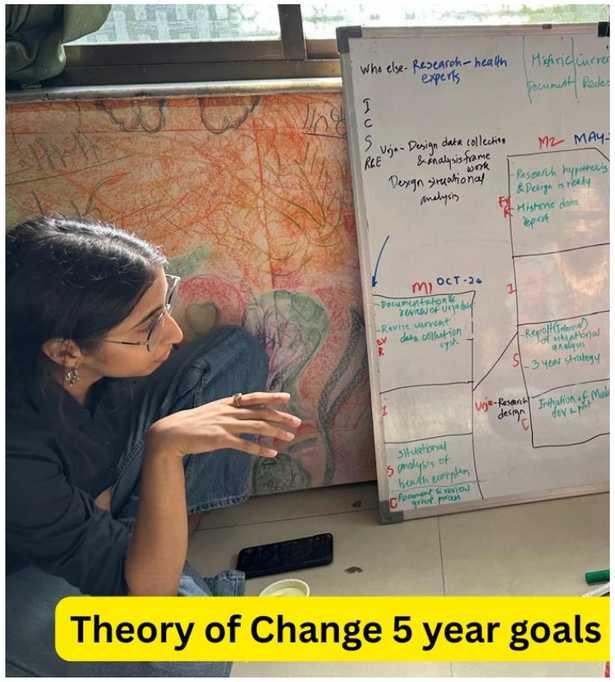
**Urja Trust stands out for its strong grassroots approach, lived experience leadership, and a holistic model supporting homeless women facing intersecting challenges related to gender, caste, mental health, and poverty.**

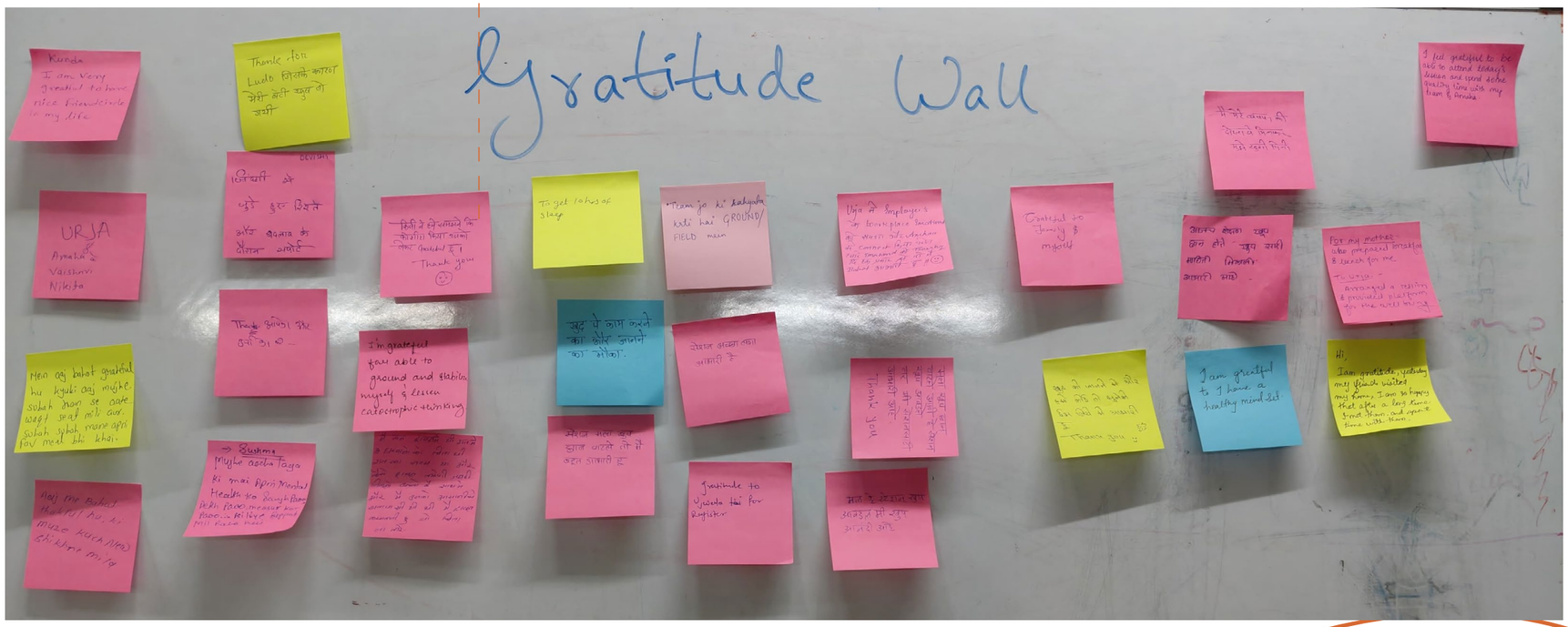
- A key strength is its trauma-informed and intersectional mental health programme, offering counselling, group sessions, creative therapies, legal aid, access to civil entitlements and referrals to specialised care. It has supported 5,000+ young women survivors over the last decade, with growing recognition from the state.
- Key opportunities for partnership included strengthening the organisation's impact communications and storytelling across channels, to share about sensitive topics and engage stakeholders strategically.

## Key achievements

**The Ember team has extensively supported Urja in developing a wellbeing support model for the team through the wellbeing fund and also convening a visit to the Health Summit.**

- Further, the team provided advisory support on the development of their website which captures Urja's work authentically to support their storytelling and enhance their reach. Ember also supported them in working on their Theory of Change with a local expert.
- Understanding Urja's deep understanding of sociometric models and alternative models of mental healthcare support, Ember has facilitated access to representing their work in multiple international networks for increased visibility such as the MHIN network. This not only validates their work but provides a platform to voice caste based and gender based discrimination and mental healthcare.
- Ember has strengthened Urja's organisational development by supporting the creation of a team wellbeing model, revisiting their Theory of Change, enhancing their digital presence, and expanding their visibility through international networks such as MHIN. These opportunities have amplified recognition of Urja's work and created platforms to advance conversations on caste, gender, and mental health-related inequities.




Theory of Change 5 year goals