



# livelihoods

*today and tomorrow*

March 2018

**‘Sukshetram’**

**Widows**

We all know what happens, when primary earner in the family dies!! Following the demise of bread winner in the family, several changes happen in the financial arrangements and subsequent economic management, which get worse with each passing day! Women in our country, in general, are subject to patriarchal customs, religious laws and widespread discrimination in inheritance rights. Women often suffer abuse and exploitation at the hands of family members mostly in the context of property disputes.



We all know what happens, when primary earner in the family dies!! Following the demise of bread winner in the family, several changes happen in the financial arrangements and subsequent economic management, which get worse with each passing day! Women in our country, in general, are subject to patriarchal customs, religious laws and widespread discrimination in inheritance rights. Women often suffer abuse and exploitation at the hands of family members mostly in the context of property disputes.

Widowhood in India is a tragic and definitive moment in a women’s life! Why widowed women are more at risk and vulnerable is one question that has a multi-layered answer. Widowed women are the worst affected largely due to the gender construction of our society. There is a wide gender gap in occupational distribution and pay; the existing patriarchal institutions, patrilineal inheritance, patrilocal residence and gendered division of labour in our society affect all women in general, but the situation is all the more worse and difficult for widowed women.

The ordeals that widows have to go through in our country are unimaginable. In general, women face many difficulties and deprivations mainly due to negative social attitudes towards women and the social restrictions that are placed upon them and their activities. Given the numbers of widows in our country, and coupling it with a society that reeks of patriarchy, it is no wonder that men hold all the assets and are also engaged in most of the paid work.

In a country like ours, where the gender dimensions are much stronger compared to other countries, it is inevitable that majority of the affected are women. We have approximately 55 million widows in India (equal to the population of countries like South Africa and Tanzania). Family as a social institution is well known for the emotional and physical support that it provides for its extended members. However, it fails to respond to the needs of women, especially for women in difficult circumstances e.g., Widows.

Widowed women are tagged as “inauspicious” and often perceived as “unlucky” and are subject to various kinds of discrimination and even ostracism. They are faced with issues ranging right from division of marital property to rights of children. Widows are denied rights over the property of dead spouses, rights of children, division of marital property. In families with less assets and incomes, widowed women are also more prone to being abandoned or forced to reside in ashrams.

Widowed women face manifold problems. Right to inheritance: Indian widowed women are often deprived of their inheritance rights. The chances of not getting their due inheritance are even higher when the widows are childless or have only daughters. This scenario is a reality for many even though we have the “Hindu Succession Act’ 1969” which makes women eligible to inherit equally with men. Not only this, a few states have even legislated equality provisions into inheritance laws.

Poverty is the common feature among widowed women in India. Widows don’t even have freedom to return to their parental homes, so they remain at their in-laws’ villages without any right to inheritance. This phenomena of patrilocal residence and patrilineal inheritance is the base for marginalization and vulnerability of widows in India. It becomes tough for widowed women to gain control of land and property due to conflicts arising out of them.

Brother-in-laws force the widows to leave the villages, and often commit crimes against widows; including harassment, physical or mental abuse, and even murder. Even a literate widowed woman many times gives it up in the face of these adversities. Worse is the case with rural widowed women, as they have to assert their claims by dealing with officials such as Land Registries, Lawyers, etc., most of who are predominantly male. The vulnerability is exposed, when widows are completely unequipped to deal with the bureaucracy and confrontations with strangers, and seek outside assistance.

Widows are potential victims of violence. In a biased, gender-constructed society like ours, widows are commonly accused of having caused their spouses’ death. The underlying factor and motivation behind this is economic gain. In few tribal communities, widows are killed as they are believed to be witches. The accusers are male relatives,

brother-in-laws or step sons mostly for want of control of assets. The cruelty that widowed women face include rape, forced marriages with their brother-in-laws, leading destitute lives in harsh conditions in temples or ashrams, lack of basic necessities like food, shelter, clothing; becoming sick due to malnourishment and lack of medical care, or falling victims to sexual abuse.

Remarriage is a distant dream for widowed women in a patriarchal society. It is forbidden!! If a widow remarries, she is forced to lose her children as well as property. In case of the widow being poor, the remarriage creates even more problems. Many times, the groom is a much elderly widower or an aged divorcee, invalid or handicapped person whose burden falls on the woman. In our country, majority of widows who have children at the time of death of their husbands do not want to remarry as they fear that the new family members might abuse the children. Remarriages are often explicitly or implicitly forbidden by local communities due to prevalent cultural norms.

Economic hardship is faced by widowed women during their lifetime and as a result they send their children out to work instead of sending them to school for education. In many cases, widowed women are forced to adopt commercial sex work for a living. Widows have very few employment opportunities due to limitations on mobility and also gender division of labour. Many a times, widows have to adjust with their in-laws' families, taking care of domestic chores of the families to continue having a roof over their heads and food in their hands.

Living life with dignity is a challenge for widowed women in our country in the social context. Mourning rites to be observed by widowed women are cruel, humiliating and outright stripping of her dignity. Widowed women have to wear white sarees, tonsure their head, forego all cosmetics, live on vegetarian diet, and remain secluded by avoiding social gatherings, wedding ceremonies and temple worships. Solitary confinement is the best for widowed women seems to be the motto of our archaic patriarchal society. The real tragedy is that women are made to believe in these outdated ideas are forced to go through the rest of their lives in isolation due to society-inflicted shame.

Death daunts the family that loses a loved one. It is worse for a widowed woman in India. Widows in India live in utter absurdity. Many areas in the country still uphold regressive customs when it comes to widowed women, so as not to encourage male sexual desire. We have more forty million widows who continue to be deprived of their basic dignity. Around 15,000 widowed women live on the streets of holy city “VRINDAVAN” alone.

Widows in India are invisible with their invisible problems. They neither get socio-economic support, nor any counseling or emotional support during distress from family and society. Their contribution to economy is not visible; as they contribute to unpaid family work at household level. It has been observed that incidence of widowhood is higher among elder women and the trend has increased from period 2001-2011. Women widows are represented disproportionately among elder population, as male widowers have a higher propensity of remarriage.

Data from the Indian Human Development (IHD) survey, suggests that there was an increase in women's work participation rates, with dissolved marriages between 2004-05 and 2011-12. A social death of women with widowhood is a traditional crime being continued in 21<sup>st</sup> century. To stop all forms of discrimination and violence against girl children and women, on 23 June 2011, United Nations General Assembly declared it as the first-ever International Widow's Day to be celebrated annually.

Hundreds of millions of women across the globe suffer from exploitation, homelessness, discrimination in laws and customs, deprivation and exclusion. There are more widows, than ever before due to armed conflicts, pandemic of HIV/AIDS and younger girls being married off to much older men. The daughters of widows continue to suffer from multiple deprivations, increasing their vulnerability to abuse.

- A widowed woman is compelled to adorn a white saree for the rest of her life.
- Satipratha; an entailed ritualistic suicide by the widow; the tradition is now outlawed.
- Renouncement of identity and wealth, a kind of psychological abuse of widow is continued in parts of UP, Haryana and Rajasthan.
- Widowed women are made to downsize her diet significantly, or are forced to turn vegetarians.
- Widowed women are treated as untouchables and it is believed that even their sight or slightest touch

- According to a survey in two countries of the South Asia region, 39% of men and women in India think that it is sometimes or always justifiable for a man to beat his wife.
- New laws to combat violence: Out of 9 countries in South Asia, 5 countries (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka) have in existence legislation against sexual harassment. Only 4 countries (Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka) have laws to prohibit domestic violence. Global data shows that where laws are in place against domestic violence, its prevalence is lower and fewer people are think it is acceptable. **Source: Progress of World’s Women: Access to Justice, 2011-12, UN Women**

Kerala & Tamil Nadu have significant percentage of their population widowed.

Kerala: 6.7% widowed, Tamil Nadu: 6.4% widowed, Karnataka: 5.7% widowed, Unified Andhra Pradesh: 6% widowed.

2001: 18.5 lakh or 0.7% of the then population of 102 crore was widowed.

2011: 4.6% or 5.6 crore are widowed of 121 crore population.

Women outnumbering men by a long way.

Source: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Massive-spike-in-number-of-widows/articleshow/46438010.cms>

Addressing the problems of widows begins with each of us changing our own mindsets towards widowhood. In India, widows are socially stigmatized to such an extent that they are excluded from our daily lives. The need of the hour is to bring them from exclusion stage to empowerment state. Widows can shape their future with confidence and dignity. In the present context, the most serious challenge of our times is that crime against women is the fastest growing crime in our country (National Crime Bureau). We need to hold consultations, and develop, design and implement various livelihood strategies to provide secure livelihoods for growing number of widows. Creating space for widows in mainstream policies and schemes would be a key move. Widows’ situation has to be recognized and addressed. Widows have been deprived of their destitute widow pensions due to corruption; only a small percentage of women widows receive pension today. Let’s all begin to challenge ourselves against these stigmas, because death is inevitable and we all stand to be widows someday!

In present context, widow women in urban centres, have spaces of their own, with not so rigid rules to follow, but they do succumb to daily discrimination. In rural areas, women face discrimination in higher levels. Communities belonging to upper caste groups have stringent patriarchal norms and rules, when compared to other backward and scheduled caste groups, where in widow women have greater degree of freedom. ❖