

# MAINSTREAMING RIGHTS OF DESERTED WOMEN

A livelihood study of deserted women from Sangli district



**SOPPECOM, Pune**

In collaboration with  
**Stri Mukti Sangharsh Chalval, Kasegaon**

With support from  
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**October 2005**

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by

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### Summary of the findings

#### Introduction

Deserted women, cast-away women, thrown away women or *parityakta- taklelya striya* are different terms used interchangeably for women who are thrown out of their marital homes or in some cases who have chosen to step out themselves. Whatever the term, the implication is often degrading. The numbers of such women appear to be increasing thus reflecting the over all status of women in society. Yet we find very little written about them or hardly find a mention of them in the literature on poverty or on social welfare policies. Conceptualisation of women as a unified category camouflages the concerns of social differentiation of women on the one hand and differentiation resulting due to forms of extreme violence on the other. While the women's movement has taken cognizance of this issue at the policy and action level one finds a general lack of concern for the quiet deprivation experienced by widows, deserted and single women.

From the little literature that is available on this question we can gauge the severity of the problem, but there is need for a systematic understanding of the question as it manifests in its various dimensions. Such an understanding would be necessary to bring the question centre stage to promote public policy and action in support of the single, deserted and widowed women.

#### Increasing number of female-headed households

When we tried to look for the numbers of single and deserted women we realised that there is hardly any data on this and that it is almost impossible to cull out information from the socio-cultural tables of the Census reports. The census has data which shows the number of widows and the number of legally separated women, but there is no way that one can assess the numbers of deserted women at any given time in the decade.

So what tentative numbers do we go by? We then looked at assessments done by different groups, the UN Human Development reports and similar such studies. They have broadly made assessments of what they refer to as female-headed households (FHH). These include families headed by widowed, deserted or single women and represent an extremely vulnerable section of women. The Rural Poverty Report 2001 shows that the number of female-headed households (FHH) has risen from 20% to 35% between 1970 to 1996. The UNDP Human Development Report for the State of Maharashtra (2002), also quotes some field studies that indicate that the proportion of FHH may be as high as 30%. However we cannot go by these studies to understand the extent of desertion as the concept of FHH is much wider than that. Women's groups in Maharashtra had made an assessment of deserted women in the state and the figures they stated were to the tune of 5-6 lakhs in the mid nineties. This estimate was based on very rapid assessments. Whatever the current numbers one thing that emerged clearly was the increasing numbers of young widows and deserted women.

The reasons for the emergence of FHH may range from male outmigration, remaining single, being widowed or due to desertion. Among these, single and deserted women heading households form a special, most vulnerable category. Desertion forms part of the extreme end of the continuum of domestic violence. Though there is considerable variation in the incidence of desertion across communities and castes, a few case studies and anecdotal information indicate that socially and economically the deserted women are the worst affected and may have very little access to resources. The National Family Health Survey (NFHS –2 1998-99) indicates that the nutritional status of single and deserted women is declining.

### **The single and deserted women's movement in Maharashtra**

Recently, over the last fifteen years or so, a movement of single and deserted women has emerged in some areas in Maharashtra. This movement has pioneered the mobilisation of deserted and single women in India, and held conferences, rallies, *yatras* and organised campaigns throughout the state. The campaign was particularly strong in Dhule, Ahmednagar and in Sangli and Satara districts. At its peak, in 1988-89, under the leadership of Stree Mukti Sangharsh Chalwal (SMS), thousands of single women of Southern Maharashtra, deserted by their husbands, took up a struggle for social honour, access to resources, sustainable agriculture and above all a home for themselves and their children. Following an intensive survey, SMS activists, who had been working in Khanapur and Walwa talukas of Sangli district since 1983, held a conference at Vita in September 1988 where initial demands were raised and a *dharna* was planned.

The women asked for separate ration cards which not only would provide increased food grains but also an independent social identity; for housing, free legal aid to fight maintenance cases, and support to collectively run plant nurseries for social forestry in the villages of the region. In one of the villages women waged a long drawn struggle for almost 10 years for their rights to the housing plots allotted to them and recently in 2003 realised them after they won the court case.

The movement has succeeded in highlighting some of their needs and demands and have also succeeded in some awareness of the problem at a state level. Firstly, it has highlighted the lack of information on the extent of desertion and the processes through which it arises. This is an important prerequisite for awareness generation, mobilisation, and networking and will facilitate creating an enabling policy and legal framework targeting them.

### **The study of single and deserted women in Maharashtra**

The increasing numbers, the extreme forms of violence meted out against them and the pitiable access to resources were the reasons for us to reopen the issue which a decade ago was on the agenda of the women's movement. The need for inquiry was at various levels- estimations of the extent of the problem; nature and severity of the problem, looking at the women's agency their survival mechanisms and strategies, what possible options can emerge in terms of improving their access to services and assets and importantly creating a space for revitalising the movement that was once active on this question.

## **The broader study objectives**

As can be seen from the above objectives the study aims at understanding and articulating the concerns of deserted women in Maharashtra. The study needs to address two kinds of concerns without which the action programme would remain weak- one would be a conceptual exercise to understand desertion its caste, religion and class dimensions and the other is to quantify the extent and assess the nature of the problem and evolve demands to support the women.

The Maharashtra level study becomes the stepping stone for what would emerge as an action programme for supporting single and deserted women. The study therefore moves with the assumption that there is a need for both conceptual as well as empirical research that can support action. The Maharashtra level study would have the following aims

1. Firstly, given the presence of initiatives of Grass Roots Organisations (GROs) and Community Based Organisations (CBOs) fighting for the rights of the deserted women, its first objective is to bring these GROs/CBOs together into a network and to provide a forum to strengthen it.
2. Secondly, with the help of the academia in the field of gender studies, carry out a fairly in depth study of the extent, nature and severity of the problem of desertion and develop a conceptual framework for understanding desertion
3. Thirdly, develop and firm up a methodology for resource assessment for planning and evaluation of livelihood options through selected case studies with the help of the network;
4. Fourthly, taking an overview of the existing schemes in the rural context like the EGS, JRY, SGSY and even watershed and wasteland development programmes to assess the potential, especially in terms of funds, for dovetailing some of the components of the development that would emerge from this study.
5. Finally, to collectively discuss and translate the insights from the above processes into a demand for rights and entitlements over productive resources (like public and private wastelands, small plots for intensive production, water, etc.) and adequate means to transform these entitlements into livelihood outcomes. It is expected that a programme for action would be drawn up in which appropriate institutional arrangements, supportive measures as well as enabling policy framework would be worked out to mainstream the programme.

## **The present study**

The scope of the question is large and calls for greater resources at hand. The need to assess the extent and nature of desertion across the state is no mean task. The present study is just a small beginning and grew out of the need to revitalise the once active deserted women's movement in Sangli district. It focussed on understanding the livelihood patterns of single widowed and deserted women who were actively part of the deserted women's movement. It looks at their lives, their economic status, their struggles and their aspirations. We feel that the study would be indicative of the wide ranging issues concerning deserted women. Our main goal is to put forth realizable opportunities for livelihood support for single and deserted women of Maharashtra through a better understanding of their socio-cultural and economic conditions.

The study was located in two talukas of Sangli district i.e. Walwa and Khanapur where the struggle of deserted women was very strong in the period between 1986-1995. Some 500 women from these talukas assembled at a rally organised by the Stree Mukti Sangharsh in Vita town of Khanapur taluka. It is some of these women who participated in the present study. The presence of a movement working on this issue and the live interaction that the members of SOPPECOM have with the movement becomes the starting point for this study.

For this analysis we have looked at the following:

- a) socio-economic status of the deserted women
- b) their daily struggles of survival
- c) their aspirations for the future
- d) their participation in the movement, the demands that they put forth and their fulfillment
- e) their perceptions as the solution to this question

We have spoken to 143 women from across three talukas of Sangli district. Our findings are based on these interactions but importantly on our long standing interactions which spans over more than a decade with these women.

Although the study is based in three talukas of Sangli district its findings and recommendations would be relevant for the entire district as well as the state.

It is a collaborative study done by Society for Promoting Participative Eco-system Management (SOPPECOM) and Stree Mukti Sangharsh Chalwal with support from the Women's Studies Unit of Tata Institute of Social Sciences Mumbai and the Krantivir Babuji Patankar Lokshastriya Samshodhan va Prabodhan Sanstha, Kasegaon.

## **Conceptual issues and framework of Analysis**

Construction of and identity of womanhood is determined not only by caste, class and ethnicity but also by marital status. The institution of marriage and the baggage that goes along with it (patrilocal residence, motherhood) have been able to control women and perpetuate exploitation. Status of the husband ultimately determines the status of the woman. Death of the husband, absence of a husband or desertion often changes the life of the woman drastically.

There is very little available literature on the concept of desertion and single hood. Few studies have been done which have tried to look at the ideology of desertion in the manner that widowhood has been addressed. There is very little analysis of the extent as well as the caste, religion and class dimensions of desertion and whether the manifestations are different.

The only available conceptual tools to understand desertion are the ones that have been developed to understand widowhood. Another concept that could help us in understanding the processes that lead to desertion is that of social exclusion. This term has been largely used in the European

context and includes a wide range of exclusionary processes. Here we would draw from Amartya Sen's useful critique of the concept where he points to the utility of the concept in forcefully advocating policy changes and diagnosing the processes that lead to relational deprivation.

For the purpose of this study we have borrowed largely from the work of Chen and Dreze on 'Widows of India' and from the work of Sylvia Chant on Women Headed Households in Latin America.

Sylvia Chant defines desertion as "a conflict induced by their partners' disengagement from household commitments and or pursuit of outside activities for example, socializing with male peers, drinking, gambling extra marital affairs" The context for her has largely been the Latin American one where she did her study on Women Headed Households.

In the Indian context the reasons for disengagement would also include inability of producing a male child, bringing in dowry from the natal home, or simply the inability to fulfil the role of a *sati savitri*.

Often the question that is raised here is whether women are to be seen only as victims or are they also agents for change. Women's agency is a less understood phenomena in the context of desertion. In our study we have seen women stepping out of marital relationships in hope of better lives. Of course all of these cases are where women were subjected to extreme forms of physical violence. Lack of mental and emotional space, freedom to think are hardly ever the reasons for women to choose to step down.

**Defining desertion** has not been a very easy task for the purpose of this study as here we include not only those whose husbands left them or they chose to step out but also the widowed and those who never married. The problems of material deprivation are largely similar but the nature of problem varies with reference to issues of social isolation, remarriage norms etc. These nuanced differences certainly need to be explored separately, although in this study we were clearly focussed on understanding the lives of all those who participated in the struggle for deserted women. The fact that widows and never married women joined in the struggle itself speaks for the similarities in the nature of exploitation.

We have broadly **analysed** the situation of single and deserted women by looking at their residence and living arrangements, access to property, their health and educational status, remarriage norms and practices, access to employment opportunities and livelihoods, issues of maintenance and of course the social stigma and the isolation faced by single, deserted and widowed women.

### **Choice of methods and data Analysis**

For the purpose of the present study we have used a mix of rational and intuitive approaches which are oriented more towards the process rather than just the product itself. These methods have been selected with the objective of understanding the phenomenon of singlehood in terms of its meaningfulness.

The choice of methods has been such that can give specific explanations and not necessarily build a grand unified theory but certainly those that would contribute to an understanding of singlehood.

A two staged study was conducted where the first stage involved a quantitative assessment of the socio-economic status of 143 single and deserted women and the second stage was a much smaller sample of 25 women drawn from different caste and religious backgrounds as well as from different age classes. Here we used the oral histories method through which we hoped to capture the different events in their lives. The advantage here was that this back and forth method helped us to seek clarifications, capture nuances, tone of voices, allow a free flowing discussions which often gets restricted by a survey method. This was not a search for a real or truth of these women's lives but rather how they view themselves and the narration of the life they have led as single women. Most often these narrations are what the person recounts from her memory. It is as she sees her past in the context of the present. So often the details of the past event are missed out but the consequences as they impinge on their present lives are recounted. One also hopes to capture the ideology, the aspirations and the values that the person believes in.

Analysis of the data was done in a critical, reflexive and iterative manner. Often it meant going back and forth to the data and to the objectives of the present study.

The choice of a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods also created a dilemma of sorts. It was possible to code all the data numerically and present the facts, or the other option was just the reverse. However the point was to combine the power of words, the feelings with the authority of numbers.

The quantitative data was analysed using variables such as caste, class and age groups. The focus was to understand the phenomenon of singlehood from social, economic and cultural aspects. Within the broad category of singlehood we looked at deserted and widowed women. This was our key variable to understand socio-economic and cultural aspects of single women's lives. However in our data we found that caste and age class too are significant variables. For eg availability of work is often affected by age class, similarly caste was an important factor in analysing the practices of remarriage.

### **Limitations of the study**

Our focus was completely on the lives of single and deserted women and hence we have hardly been able to compare with the general situation of women which would be necessary to put the question in a context. Similarly it would be worthwhile to look at the larger socio-cultural and economic contexts in which these women are placed- the general availability of employment opportunities, access to services, educational opportunities, access to property etc.

The other limitation which was mentioned earlier was the need to look at the question of widows and deserted women separately, many of the widowed women who participated in the study had of course been first deserted and later widowed.



The other conceptual difficulties that we faced were with reference to interpreting agency of women. Do we understand the whole phenomenon as one of deprivation where women are only victims or do we also go beyond that and see them as survivors? The question that follows then is how do we interpret agency? Often women's responses show an over riding concern for the family. Their agency often is towards meeting livelihood goals of the household-better health of children, education of children etc. Can this be understood as agency or that agency necessarily is when she acts on her own account and for her own self?

However our most important limitation was in analysing the rich data obtained through the oral histories and in fact this is the reason why we see the need for a much broader participation of academia and women's groups in understanding and articulating these concerns.

### **Ethical Issues**

The present research was guided by an action agenda so in that sense there was less to grapple with in terms of the ethical issues associated with research and studies of this kind. But this is a question that we need to raise and address in our future studies. The question of how this research contributes to changing the situation of single women. The researcher organisations' involvement in the change process and the collaborative study with the movement is significant here.

### **Major study findings**

The study is based on interviews with 143 women across three talukas of Sangli district. All these women have been abandoned by their husbands and have been actively involved in the Stri Mukti Sangharsh Calval activities since 1988.

Our findings clearly show that single women are a highly deprived and impoverished lot with very little access to either familial property or to government schemes Many of them have in fact said that they have the responsibility to fend for their children but with few and no resources to do so.

### **The women who participated in the study**

Single and deserted women for the purpose of the present study include all the women who have been abandoned by their husbands. It includes both whose present marital status is deserted as well as those who are widowed. Of all the women involved, we chose 150 women living in 6 villages spread in 3 talukas of Sangli district. Of these 7 women could not be included as they had either migrated, were mentally unstable or were unable to give any information in a coherent manner. Two of the women who were listed had recently passed away and therefore could not be included in the study. In the end we had extensive interviews with 143 women only.

These 143 women are not only victims of desertion and domestic violence but have also been in leadership roles in the movement at different points and with varying degrees.

These women come from Khanapur, Kadegaon and Walwa talukas of Sangli district. Walwa, on the banks of the Krishna, is the irrigated sugar-rich taluka of the district. Only one of the villages

studied i.e. Bahe is from Walwa taluka. Khanapur and Kadegaon are in the drought prone region. Women from these two talukas were part of the militant struggle on drought organised by the Mukti Sangharsh Movement.

The caste profile of these women shows that desertion is not limited to a single or few castes only. It cuts across caste groups.

There are no Brahmans or merchant castes in our study, and the proportion of Maratha-Kunbis, though high, is much less than their percentage of the total population (almost 50% in this region). This is not because these sections lack desertion but because “higher” caste families want to hide the cases of deserted and returned women among them. There is sufficient evidence to show that domestic violence and restrictions on women are higher in both the upper classes and castes.

Percentage of scheduled castes among the sample of deserted women of Matang (10.4%), Mahar (16%) and Ramoshi (12.5%) are also high compared to the other caste groups, though perhaps not disproportionately more compared to their percentage in the district. Since this is not a study of the extent of desertion and widowhood one cannot make conclusions regarding the caste wise extent of desertion

<b>Age class wise Marital status (%)</b>		
<b>Age Class</b>	<b>Deserted</b>	<b>Widowed</b>
Upto 25	6.8	1.8
26 to 35	26.1	21.8
36 to 45	28.7	30.9
46 to 55	24	23.6
56 to 65	11.4	5.4
66 and above	3.4	16.3

### **Residence and living arrangements**

Residence is an important indicator of the available support systems for the women. Here we have looked at living arrangements by looking at the village of residence and whether they lived in a joint household or an independent one. Our study shows that 80% of them are now residing in their natal villages. Only 7.6% women are residing in their marital villages while 11% are actually staying in villages that are neither their natal nor their marital homes.

It is important to note here that of the 55 widows in the study 39 of them or 70% have chosen to or have been forced to stay in their natal homes as against 10 (18.1%) who are living in their marital villages. This is also explained by the fact that most of the widows are those who were in the first instance deserted by their husbands and forced to come back to their natal homes. When we asked some of the widows why they came back to their natal villages their response was predictable. Akkatai Pol of Vangi village says 'As soon as my husband died, my in-laws started threatening me with dire consequences. They wanted to drive me out of the house as they thought that I would claim a share in the family property'. A small percentage of widows continues to stay on in their marital villages either due to a long term hope of gaining access to family property for their children's future or simply because there is no support from the natal home. However as we shall see a little later none of these widows have marital property in their names. To go back to Akkatai Pol who says 'I have not given up as yet. After my husband's death in 1993, I filed a case against my in-laws for a place and a home. It is 12 years and I am still struggling'

Although most of the women are in their natal villages presently a large number of are in fact staying in independent houses and not sharing the hearth with either their parents or brothers. About 45% of the women who have returned to their natal villages now live in independent households while 35.6% live in joint families. 11.8% of the women live in neither their marital nor their natal villages and have set up their independent households in new villages. Jaitunbi from Balwadi started by staying with her brothers and parents, soon she realised that this was not going to last and she no longer wanted to be a burden on the family. She moved out, stays in a small room given by her parents but maintains a separate hearth. She narrates one of her experiences 'Once (while I was living with my brothers) I bought something for my daughter, he was very offended- how could I do this without permission. Ever since then, I decided to live on my own and raise my daughters independently'.

Most of the women said the same thing. Although they needed the support from their natal homes, as soon as it was possible they have preferred moving out.

Table 8 shows us that 60.1% of the total women live in independent households within their marital or natal villages. This is indicative of both a strong will to lead an independent lifestyle as well as in some cases it is a decision willed on the women by either their parents or their brothers with whom they live.

Among those who reported that they lived in Joint families many we realised were in fact cooking separately although they were part of the same residence. Some others like Janabai from Bahe village just didn't have that choice. Her brother and sister in law got all the housework done from her and also ensured that her wages at the end of the day were deposited with them. She had no control over the money she earned.

In general while responding to this, women were not very forthcoming perhaps due to fear of family members with whom they were residing.

## **Reasons for desertion**

The reasons for desertion ranged from alcoholic husband, wife beating, lack of a male heir, complaints of inefficiency at domestic work, suspicion of extramarital affairs, property related matters, widowhood, sexual inadequacy etc. The reasons are wide and sometimes women have been kicked out because she cannot cook fast, sometimes because she didn't ask her husband what food to cook.

Of the sample 80% have been deserted for more than 20 years now. This also indicates the permanency of the situation.

Most of the women (53 of 88) have reported that their husbands have remarried after deserting them. However none of the women have shown any willingness to remarry. Women had already been so traumatised by their first marriage that they did not venture into second marriages. Many cited children as being the main reason for not remarrying. Most Dalit women reported that remarriage is permissible in their community, however they have not opted for that. So although norms do permit remarriage the question often is how much choice do women really have? The constraints on choice are shaped by social and cultural norms and how people look at singlehood. She remains stamped as a loose woman even if she remarries, while a man needs to remarry to run the household..

## **Poverty profile of the deserted women**

Assessments of material poverty can be made through assessing their incomes, their nutritional intake, their access to property and their health profiles.

### **Access to property**

From among the 143 women, only 1 woman owns agricultural land. As far as housing is concerned, 34 women have their own houses among them 23 are from Bahe village who have gained rights through a protracted struggle. Neither belonging to the conjugal homes nor to the natal homes, these women would find security if there were shelter over their heads - a demand that has been consistently put forth before the district officials.

Very few of these women own other assets such as TVs, two wheelers, electricity connections, biogas etc. The only asset owned by a large number of these women is the kerosene stove. This is indicative of the poor cash flows in the household and clear priorities for livelihood security.

### ***Way Below the Poverty line and yet not in the BPL***

Most of the women engage in agricultural labour work. Very few of them are able to do anything else but agriculture labour work. Lack of skills to do anything else, lack of access to resources such as credit or land and restrictions on mobility force these women to stay in agriculture labour work alone. Often as our findings show this labour work is not available for more than 100 days in a year.

<b>Table 16 Marital Status wise days of employment and wages in a year</b>							
Marital Status	Number of women	Total Days in a year	Available Days in a year/ woman	Total wages in Rs (a)	Total wages in kind converted to Rs (b)	Total wages (a+b)	Annual Income in Rs /woman /year
Deserted	88	10,077	115	289,991	23,770	313,761	3565
Widowed	55	5564	101	166,610	12,960	179,570	3264
<b>Total</b>	<b>143</b>	<b>15,641</b>	<b>109.3</b>	<b>456,601</b>	<b>36,730</b>	<b>493,331</b>	<b>3449</b>

All year round work availability of 100 days has meant annual incomes which are largely below Rs 4000/ as can be seen in table 33. Almost 52% of the women have an income which is below Rs 4000/. Here we must remember that the onus of maintaining their children is entirely on them. These are single earner households. If they are residing with their joint families then their entire income has to be deposited with the family and they have no say in the expenditure related decision but usually the tradeoff is that their children would be taken care of.

<b>Marital Status wise income</b>				
Marital Status	11,000 and above	4,000 to 10,999	Below 4,000	No of Women
Deserted	2	41	45	88
Widowed	3	22	30	55
<b>Total</b>	<b>5 (3.4%)</b>	<b>63 (44.05)</b>	<b>75 (52.4)</b>	<b>143 (100)</b>

Although most of these women are living in poverty we do not see them being included in the BPL lists. Almost 60% of these women are recorded as being above the poverty line when the figures that we see in the above table show us that only 3.4% have incomes which are above Rs. 11,000/-

Inclusion under Below Poverty Line (BPL)					
Caste	Deserted		Widowed		Total
	Under BPL	Above BPL	Under BPL	Above BPL	
Chambhar	0	2	2	2	6
Dhanagar	0	2	1	1	4
Dhor	1	5	0	3	9
Gondhali	2	0	0	0	2
Gosavi	1	0	0	0	1
Kumbhar	1	1	1	1	4
Lingayat	1	0	0	0	1
Lohar	0	2	0	0	2
Mahar	7	10	2	4	23
Maratha	9	10	9	12	40
Matang	4	7	1	3	15
Muslim	4	3	2	1	10
Nhavi	0	0	1	1	2
Kaikadi	0	0	0	1	1
Ramoshi	6	8	2	2	18
Shimpi	0	1	0	0	1
Vadar	0	1	1	2	4
Total	36	52	22	33	143

### ***Access to legal Aid***

As far as access to legal aid is concerned of the sample only about 14% women actually were able to reach legal aid and fight for their cause while 86% either refrained from doing so or simply did not have the means to do so. This finding applied to most of the deserted women who just do not seem to have the means to fight legal battles. It also is a statement on the tedious procedures of the judiciary, which offers little for the deprived

### ***Food Security and Access to Public Distribution System***

With incomes below the official poverty line, it would have been natural for them to claim their stakes to the public distribution system for meeting their food needs. However the picture is quite to the contrary. Table below gives the details of the expenditure incurred by the women around the

year towards their living. Of the Rs 13,258 spent by a woman towards her annual expenses Rs 10,386 is spent on purchasing food from the open market. This is almost 78.33% of the total expense. Only a small component of the food comes from PDS (Rs 903) which in reality is supposed to meet the food security needs of the poor. Apart from non inclusion in BPL women also cited non availability of ration as one of the main reasons for their increasing dependence on open markets. Women also complained of being forced to purchase ration in bulk. Often they have cash only enough to make daily or weekly purchases. The PDS does not allow for these flexibilities. Possibilities of introducing food coupons could be considered and open markets be forced to sell grains at rationed rates for holder of these food coupons.

<b>Annual expenses incurred in Rs</b>		
<b>Items of expenditure</b>	<b>Total annual expenses for the entire sample of 143 women (Rs)</b>	<b>Annual expense/woman (Rs)</b>
Fodder for cattle	22,168	155
Health	166,664	1165
Food through open market	1,485,325	10,386
Electricity	72,072	504
Annual interest	20,560	143
Food through PDS	129,168	903
Total	1,895,957	13,258

### ***Health and Nutrition***

Closely linked to the poverty issue is the access to nutrition and health services. We did not explore these issues in detail but our preliminary findings show that nutritional intake of women is poor. Often women eat vegetables only once a week and protein rich meat is consumed usually not more than once a month. Being single they cook food only once a day and sometimes save it until the next day. This has caused severe health problems. Many have also lost appetite due to mental strains and stresses.

### ***Fall back options***

The SHG wave does not seem to have spread into these areas. Few of the women have any savings in the SHGs. Many of them still largely depend on large farmers for their borrowing. They do have loans that they have to pay back at interest rates that range from 4-5% per month.

Women also have little financial backing from their families who themselves are deeply entrenched in poverty.

Access to government schemes too has not been possible for most of the women. Table below shows that of the total women only 18 women are benefiting from some government scheme or the other. These include Sanjay Gandhi Niradhar Yojana and the Antyodaya or the targeted PDS. This is a matter of concern since a large number of them are in need of several social security measures. All the women complained of tedious procedures as the main constraint in accessing government schemes. They also felt that a comprehensive social security scheme needs to be developed targeting the deserted women.

<b>Marital Status wise access to Government Schemes</b>			
<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>Beneficiary</b>	<b>Non-beneficiary</b>	<b>Total</b>
Deserted	8	80	88
Widowed	10	45	55
Total	18	125	143

## **Final Comments and Recommendations**

### **Need for a two-pronged strategy**

We feel a two pronged approach would be necessary to address the question of desertion. While at one level targeting is necessary to ensure social and livelihood security to the single women, it is also important to develop an approach which is of a more general nature for all women, since every woman is under the threat of being deserted. An approach which solely targets single and deserted women in fact assumes that women in marriage or with male partners are better off and it is the absence of the male that leads to a major disadvantage for women. Disadvantage is rarely understood in terms of lack of access to resources for women and the strong socio-cultural bias that puts women at a disadvantage. Despite this disadvantage deserted women often have to take on the burden of raising children and usually this is done single handedly.

### ***The Long-term goals***

The longer term initiatives which are of a more ideological nature will have to be geared to such questions as women rights and empowerment. Often these are overlapping needs and evolve out of interactions with one another.

1. Registering land and property in the names of wives as well as husbands would not only allow women greater security and stability in the event of a conjugal breakdown, but could also enhance their possibilities for determining household arrangements.
2. Women might find it easier to ask men to leave home if they know that separation will not entail leaving home themselves and forfeiting their assets. Similarly men would think twice before throwing the woman out of the house or getting a second wife for himself.



3. In general, equal access to property, parity in incomes etc would go a long way in providing security for women. It also provides the space to challenge patriarchy and the dominant socio-cultural norms that govern the relationships between men and women. In the event of a conjugal breakdown it provides a fall back option.
4. Greater access to political power (which has only begun at the panchayat and district level) will be a further aid in accessing the resources for their struggles.
5. Although the study does show that deserted women do develop several imaginative strategies for earning conserving and stretching their income, their financial position would be much better if female earnings were closer to men's. A struggle for parity in incomes for women in general therefore is a critical in the long term.

### ***What have been the gains so far and what remains to be done in the immediate future***

After a large number of rallies, conferences, sit-ins the district administration had to concede to most of the demands of the movement. In fact almost all of the demands were agreed upon in principle. The first one to be fulfilled was that of allocating separate ration cards for women and recognising them as heads of household.

The second demand that was fulfilled was that of accepting the name of the mother on for school enrolments.

The then district collector Shridhar Joshi also agreed to allocating 2000 sqft of housing land to the women in all the villages where the demand was there and where gavthan extension was on the cards. Bahe from Walwa taluka was the first village to gain from this order. Despite the completion of legal procedures women were actually able to gain control over their housing plots after a long and tedious struggle involving legal battle as well as other campaigns for 12 years.

This unfortunately did not follow elsewhere although some initial steps like identifying lands, surveying deserted women and in some villages measuring plots too did take place. The demand for housing plots is one of the major demands of the women that needs to be fulfilled urgently. Balawadi, Ramapur, Alsand, Vangi, Vazar are villages where this can be done without much difficulty if the administration demonstrates a positive will.

Demands such as access to gairan lands for livelihood support, inclusion under BPL lists, provision of child care and support for education of children, maintenance from state etc all remained on paper itself.

### **Ration Cards**

Of these 6 villages surveyed, women from all the villages have got ration cards in their names. This was an important achievement of the movement which has held together the women for 15 long years.

### **Housing plots and civic amenities**

The demand for housing plots has been fulfilled only in one village of Bahe through an order of the Collector in 1989. Women actually got access to this land only after a legal battle of 12 long years. They are now staying on their plots and dialogue for developing a housing scheme is going on.

In the rest of the villages the district officials have identified land along with the SMS, plot measurements have been completed, but allotments have not been made. Several reasons are being put forth by the officials none which seem to make any sense to either the women or the SMS. Balawadi village of Khanapur taluka is the only village where lands have not been identified so far, but women do have suggestions regarding the same. In every other village action needs to be taken immediately or else women are threatening to come on the streets.

All of these women have been saying that they would prefer to be given housing plots under the extended gaothan schemes rather than away from the villages as independent colonies of single women. Madina from Alsand said that already men eye them with suspicion, moving out to an exclusive single women's colony would do more harm than good. This is an important point than certainly needs to be considered before allotments are made in these 5 villages.

Associated demands are for credit for building their homes, access to water, electricity and other civic amenities without which housing plots may lie vacant, and provide an opportunity for government to take them back. Recently Bahe women have been issued an oral threat for the same reason.

### **Coverage Under BPL**

One of the major demands of the women is that they be included in the BPL lists. SMS is also demanding a revision of the BPL list and inclusion of parityakta women under BPL. The present study provides ample proof of women's income status and their material deprivation and poor social supports. If such women are not included under the BPL then who is? This is a question that is bothering the movement and women will agitate against this.

### **Social Security schemes**

Schemes such as the Sanjay Gandhi Niradhar Yojana etc involve tedious procedures and are time consuming. Women need easy procedures and smooth and non corrupt administering of these schemes. More schemes that provide pensions to the single women after the age of 55 yrs should be added to the basket of the existing social security schemes. Unless this is done little would come by way of immediate relief.

### **Access to Land and Water**

Land and water for livelihood security has been one of the major demands of the movement. In 1989 the then Collector had promised access to gairan or community lands for income generation. This needs to be pursued and the demand needs to be fulfilled.

### **Support for Diversification to Non farm incomes**

In drought prone areas availability of non farm income opportunities in drought years goes a long way in supporting the incomes of the poor. Most of these women work solely as agriculture labourers getting hardly more than 100 days of wage work in a year. Lack of mobility and skills restricts their income earning opportunities in the non farm sector. Women therefore have demanded soft loans for goat rearing and raising local breed of chicken. One can go further and say that women need support both in the form of credit and skills training if opportunities of diversification have to open up. Unless that happens it is unlikely that income security for these women would come about.

### **Legal Procedures**

Often women abandon follow up of maintenance cases both because of the tedious procedures and also to avoid the ongoing contact they do not desire. It is therefore important to look at some of the legal measures that deter women from fighting for what is duly theirs. The Stree Mukti Sangharsh had in fact in the late nineties suggested that the state develop a maintenance fund to support the deserted women and save them from the tedious procedures of securing maintenance. The legal procedures should allow the women to retain their independence.

### **Provision of health care and support for child care**

Women's health is an area which has so far been less discussed within the single women's movement. It is also an area where more studies need to be in place. The present study is only an indicative one showing that the health status of these women is particularly poor and a nutrition programme needs to be developed. Iron supplements and access to food for work kind of programmes would therefore be critical.

Women have not been able to provide for their children's education. Those who have valued education have taken loans to provide for hostel and school fees. Women have demanded that the state recognise this need of women and provide for free education for children of single women. In a recent parishad they have stated that certain free seats in hostels and schools be reserved for their children.

The two pronged strategy that is proposed here would certainly mean a long struggle for all concerned. We recognise that the ideological struggle is possible only through interventions at different levels, beginning from gender sensitive socialization at home and outside, to focusing on different policy initiatives that look at women's issues from a rights perspective. This will have to be a much wider struggle with women's groups, the civil society and the state joining hands.

However the need of the day is to address some of the immediate demands that have been raised by the movement since the mid eighties. Most of these demands are yet to be met. All the women in the study have unanimously stated that meeting these demands would qualitatively improve their livelihoods.