

**MAINSTREAMING RIGHTS OF DESERTED WOMEN**  
**A livelihood study of deserted women from Sangli district**

by

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# **Mainstreaming Rights of Deserted Women**

## **A livelihood study of deserted women from Sangli district**

World over poverty among women is rising faster than poverty among men and, despite having the highest per capita income, Maharashtra is no exception to this. The Sex Ratio in Maharashtra has now declined from 927 in 1991 to 922 in 2001. Districts that have the worst child sex ratios are the ones, which are considered to be the most prosperous. Sangli, Satara and Kolhapur districts are the worst districts in Maharashtra as far as Child sex ratios are concerned. Sangli is the worst district in Maharashtra with a sex ratio as low as 850.

Apart from this on all other counts of Gender Development Index (GDI), Maharashtra performs poorly. The literacy gaps between men and women are high and so are the gaps in incomes of men and women.

### **The most vulnerable section: Single and deserted women**

No accurate statistics are available on the extent of the single and deserted women for the state of Maharashtra. Some assessments done by various movements, especially the *Stree Mukti Sangharsh chahval* in Sangli district and the *Samata Andolan* in Nasik have estimated over 7 lakh single and deserted women in Maharashtra.

As per the 1991 census figures the total number of never married, divorced and separated and widowed women in the age group of 20-65 yrs in Sangli district is 13%. The figure for Sangli rural is about 12%. The overall statistics for Maharashtra for this age group is 14%. This does not include women who are deserted by their husbands but legally not separated. So the numbers would escalate if those missing women are also taken into account.

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 deserted women are the worst affected and may have very little access to resources. Also, the National Family Health Survey (NFHS -2 1998-99) indicates that the nutritional status of single and deserted women is declining. Anaemia is on the rise and so is overall malnutrition.

Although these things are known there is hardly any systematic documentation of their numbers and concerns. Various movements had demanded that deserted women be accounted through Census surveys. But this has gone unnoticed until now. The result is of course a complete lack of understanding of the concerns of this group which is expanding. No policies, schemes or programmes are developed with a focus on addressing the question of desertion.

### **Stri Mukti Sangarsh and the Deserted Women's Struggle**

In the early eighties *Mukti Sanghash Movement* (MSM) mobilized rural peasants and toilers around the issue of drought and alternatives. Large numbers of women participated in these struggles which also brought to light the violence women suffered within marriage, the question of dowry and desertion. Informal surveys were carried out in different parts of Sangli and Satara districts to make an assessment of the extent and nature of the problem. These surveys showed that almost every village had about 35-50 deserted women. These alarming numbers led to initiating an action on the question of desertion. *Sabhas*(Meetings) were conducted in a large number of villages across the two districts, *shibirs* (training programmes) for creating legal awareness were conducted, cases for maintenance and alimony were filed. A charter of demands was drawn and women gave a call for action. A large conference was organised in the Vita, with nearly 700-800 women participating.

Women's groups from across Maharashtra extended their support to this conference which resolved to fight for the dignity and honour of single and deserted women.

One of the central demands of the movement was getting independent ration cards to secure the status of "female heads of households". The ration card represents an independent identity and is the route to availing of several schemes and programmes of the state. Most of these women belong to neither the natal nor the conjugal homes and therefore their second demand was of right to housing through access to 2000 sq ft of housing plot for every woman. Most of the women said that they were burdened with the responsibility of raising their children single-handedly. Support for education for children was another demand that was strongly put forth. Child welfare, pension schemes, medical and legal facilities were some of the other demands that the movement struggled for.

The Vita conference marked the beginning of a long struggle which organised several rallies, meetings, morchas and sit-ins to see through the fulfilling of these demands. In 1989 about 300 women marched to the Collectors office and announced an indefinite sit in if the demands were not met. Of particular significance was the demand for housing plots. The demand for independent ration cards was approved by the district level officials and almost all the participating women got ration cards issued in their names. The other major victory for the movement came in 1989, when the district collector of Sangli issued an order allocating 2000 sq ft of plots to each of the 23 deserted women from village Bahe, in Walwa taluka. Although the actual allotment was done in 1991, women were able to set up their houses only 12 years later in 2003 after a protracted legal battle. The land allotted to these women was encroached land and the state had no intention of fighting the legal battle on behalf of the women. SMS had to be a party to the petition and fight to win what is now considered as a historic moment in struggle.

But there is still a long way to go.....numbers of deserted seem to be on the rise and resources are fewer, list of unmet demands is increasing. Non action on the part of the state means triggering the latent militancy of the women who are now willing to come on the streets to ensure that they get what is duly theirs.

Stri Mukti Sangarsh Calval (Women's Liberation Struggle Movement; after SMS) was founded on March 1985 originally with links to the Mukti Sangarsh Movement which was working on issues of drought and water in Khanapur taluka of Sangli district. With the slogan of "*hirvi dharti, stri shakti, manav mukti*" (green earth, women's power, human liberation) it very quickly gained a broader base through association with movements in Tasgaon and Walwa talukas and Karad taluka of Satara district. For the first few years, activists Nagmani Rao and Gauri De (working in Khanapur) and Indutai Patanakar and Gail Omvedt of Kasegaon, with the support of men of Mukti Sangarsh, worked with women involved in the general anti-drought movements and in taking up such special women's issues as alcoholism, dowry deaths, atrocities against women, and discrimination on EGS schemes. They quickly became aware that the worst situation was faced by deserted women in the area, who came from all castes and communities.

Informal surveys were done to estimate the extent of the problem and then, contacting existing mahila mandals throughout Satara and Sangli districts, initial organizing campaigns were carried out. A major conference was held at Vita on 25 September 1988 attended by 600 women, mostly from Satara, Kolhapur and Sangli districts but with activists also from Pune, Delhi, Mumbai and the adivasi areas of northern Maharashtra also participating. A list of demands was drawn up, and after a followup shibir at Walwa and initial visits to the Sangli collector's office, a "struggle shibir" was held and an indefinite dharna was announced. This took place at Sangli on February 15-16, 1989, and was historically the first case of a struggle action like a dharna on women's demands only. Taking part were 306 women from 31 villages in three districts; again an unprecedented representation. After two days of the sit-in, the then-Collector Shridhar Joshi agreed to most of the demands, and in particular made the promise that 2 gunthas of land would be given for housing by extending the gavthan in villages where gram panchayats made such a resolution and promised that even if such a resolution were not made he, the Collector, would take action.

Several follow-up legal shibirs were held, involving again women from various villages in three districts and with the participation of social activists as well as lawyers from Sangli. This has resulted in a few general overall gains of the deserted women's movement, especially the granting of ration cards. Campaigns continued with shibirs on women and agriculture, women and politics and other issues, including a meeting with then Social Welfare Minister Ramdas Athavale on 5 June 1990. In 1991 Seema Kulkarni of Pune began working with the deserted women's movement and helping to organize programmes on women and sustainable agriculture.

In the middle of 1989 itself a major step was taken regarding plots for women's housing when the initiative of Shrimati Kamaltai Patil, Manda Savant and other deserted women in Bahe (Walwa taluka) won an order from the government to give plots of 2 guntas to each of 23 deserted women. This was part of a general distribution of land with other plots given to SC households. However, the land itself, in a now-separate panchayat of Hubalwadi, was encroached upon, and the encroachers resisted, going to court against women activists Indutai Patankar and Kamaltai Patil, and gaining a stay order. It took over a decade to fight these cases with the help of Mihir Desai, involving also campaigns of occupation of the land with support from women's organizations in Pune city, rural Pune, Mumbai, Nandurbar, and elsewhere. Among supporting organizations the All India Women's Federation led by Tara Reddy and Shanta Ranade; Stri Mukti Sanghatana of Shahada (Nandurbar), Masum, the Women's Studies Centre at Pune University, deserve mention. Only recently the final victory of the women was celebrated when women were able to set up their houses only 12 years later in 2003 after the protracted legal battle – and then they were struck by the great floods of August, 2005! The women however have faced all these obstacles and gone ahead with efforts to build their new homes. Their victory is a victory for – as the name of one follow-up dharna took it – "*bhumikanya Sita*." It is historic in being the first time such a major allotment of house plots, has been given to deserted women, thus giving them the social recognition they deserve as women heads of households.

Along with the deserted women's movement other activities of Stri Mukti Sangarsh have continued, including shibirs on sustainable agriculture, consciousness-raising campaigns on issues of politics, education, fighting atrocities and so on. Health campaigns were initiated in Azra taluka of Kolhapur district. Women began to be observable playing a major role in the campaigns of drought-prone farmers and dam evictees that have been going on in the districts of southwestern Maharashtra for over a decade now. They began to interact with "women's liberation" activists. Finally on May 8, 2005 a major conference of the Stri Mukti Sangarsh Calval was held in Kasegaon, attended by nearly 1000 women as well as activists from other parts of Maharashtra. Among the many issues discussed two demands in particular came forward: the demand of women in the dam evictees movements that when land is given in compensation they should also be recognized as landholders; and the demand of deserted women just as in the case of Bahe, house plots should be given in other villages of the area. It is these two demands that are before the district governments and the government of Maharashtra for immediate consideration. The implementation of both would be an illustration of the leading role of the state and the region in progressive social programmes.

## **The Present Study**

This study is intended to back of the demands of the deserted women's section of the Stri Mukti Sangharsh movement. 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. It is impossible with limited resources to assess the extent of desertion even in one district. Rather we focus on the nature of desertion and the problems deserted women face both within the family and outside of it. It is an effort to look at the present status of the deserted women who have been part of the struggle initiated by *Stree Mukti Sangharsh Chalval* in the mid eighties. 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. 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 Chalval* with support from the Women's Studies Unit of Tata Institute of Social Sciences Mumbai **the Krantivir Babuji Patankar Lokshastriya Samshodhan va Prabodhan Sanstha, Kasegaon.**

## **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. All the widowed families included in this study are those who were previously deserted by their husbands. The present study focuses only on those women who actively participated in the Deserted women's struggle from 1988. **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.

## **Where do they live**

**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. Village wise distribution of the sample is provided in the table below (See Table 1 for details).

### **Their marital status**

All of these women fall in two categories a) those deserted by their husbands and b) widows.

So there are 88 (61.8%) women who are deserted, and 55 (38.4%) who are widowed. These categories are based on the current marital status of the women. Of the 55 widows 25 had been deserted by their husbands and were staying in their natal homes even before they were widowed. The remaining 30 have come for good to their natal homes after widowhood, but they too have said that they were harassed but didn't have the courage to return to their natal homes while their husbands were alive. After being widowed they could hardly take to victimisation at the hands of their in-laws (See table 2 for details).

### **Their age**

If we were to look at the age groups of these women we find that almost 80% of deserted and widowed women fall in the age group between 26-55 years. Of these about 50% are in the age group 26-45 years indicating a very young profile of desertion and widowhood (See table 3 for details). Most of these women have been part of the struggle that took off in the late 80s. Some others joined in the early 90s. So most of them have been deserted for over 10 years now. Although most of them are less than 60, age seems to have caught on them. Various kinds of health problems have in general reduced their capacity to work and cater to their children's needs.

### **Their caste**

We have also tried to look at the caste wise differences in reasons and implications of and responses to desertion and widowhood. Our study therefore included women of all caste groups. Table 4 presents a caste wise distribution. 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 (See Table 5 for details).

### **What do they do for a living**

About 76% of deserted and widowed women are engaged in agriculture wage labour leaving only 24% of women in other activities. Of these 24% almost 10% are not engaged in any activity

either due to old age or health related problems. This is clearly indicative of a livelihood profile, which is largely dependent on agricultural wage labour.

8 % of deserted and widowed women are engaged in other activities such as poultry, domestic work, anganwadi helper, vegetable vendors etc. What is evident from the findings is the employment restrictions that are imposed on single women. Very few women have been able to diversify into other livelihood activities. Although this would be true of most women we find that single women do not have even a derivative access to property such as land, cattle, wells etc. This is accompanied by a complete lack of bargaining power *vis a vis* male employers.

### **Their education**

The data on education of deserted and widowed women indicates that 65.7% of the women are non- literate. This also explains why a large group of these women have few options but to work as agricultural labourers. Apart from formal education these women also have little or no training in other non-farm activities such as processing or otherwise. It therefore leaves very few opportunities for women to diversify into non-farm activities.

### **Where do they live**

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. As can be seen from Table7 most of the women i.e. 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.

## **Ownership of Property and Assets**

### *Housing and other civic amenities*

The data in table shows that almost 70% women do not own any house at all. They are either living on rent, on encroached space or are residing within the joint family set up. Of the 34 (23.7%) who do own houses, 23 are those who have gained access to plots through the deserted women's rights struggle. All these are women from Bahe or the now rehabilitated village of Hubalwadi. The remaining 11 are those who have access to either some marital property or those whose parents have allotted plots to them largely due to the absence of a male heir. But this as we can see is a very small number. A large number of women have to depend largely on their parents or brothers in their natal villages.

Of the 34 who do own houses, most live in kuccha houses with walls and ceiling made from leaf material. The flooring is largely of cow dung.

Other civic amenities like toilets etc are lacking. Most of the women use open spaces as toilets and the others use public toilets if any are available.

Amenities like electricity connections are in fact available for only 17.4% or 25 women. Similarly if one looks at data on access to drinking water we find that only 17 of women actually have an independent connection to their houses. The rest access their drinking water either from public sources or from other privately owned dug wells or borewells.

### ***Ownership of Agricultural Land***

It is not surprising to find that of the 143 women respondents only one woman has any agricultural land in her name. Of these 40 women reported that they were part of landowning families. This is a universal finding across class and caste. The one single woman who reported land in her name was a widow who got her share of the property and who continues to stay in her marital village and home. None of the women took land on lease to cultivate thereby indicating an overall low bargaining power of women to access land and enter into any self enterprise.

Some of the widows we interviewed said that they just had to forgo their rights over their husbands land. Many were not even aware that they did have a right over the land. Those who were did not have the social or financial strength to pursue the matter in the courts. Although in this study we did not really delve into this issue further, our experiences tell us that most widows have willed away their rights to agricultural property. In Jaitun's case she says 'My husband was really naïve. We were doing fine, but my brother-in-law wanted all the land in his name and he wanted my husband's signatures on the papers. He filled my husband with all sorts of untruths about me, made him desert me and our three daughters and grabbed the land too. After that I was not allowed into that house' Here we see that desertion was over property. In fact Jaitun's people had got her married to this 'old and foolish fellow' precisely because he owned land, but that was also the main reason for her desertion. If this land was jointly held by both of them, no one would have had the courage to throw her out of the house.

### ***Cattle Ownership***

Our findings show that most of the women own or have leased in only small ruminants or chicken. In fact ownership of chicken is what seems to be the most viable option for these women. Buffaloes and cows are owned by a very small number of women. Bullocks and other cattle are not owned at all by either of the categories of women.

Our findings clearly point to lack of ownership to productive assets such as land, cattle or housing thereby leading to increasing insecurity and vulnerability of women.

### ***Cooking and other Equipment***

Table 14 is indicative of the material deprivation of all the women. In fact ownership of a stove is the largest among women. Other equipment like, TV, sowing machines, mixers etc are hardly owned by women.

### ***Livelihood Activities***

Broadly speaking our findings show that women have a restricted access to diversify. Most rural women would, due to their gender specific tasks, have restricted employment opportunities, however we find that the space constricts further for single women. This is mainly because of their lack of access to productive resources and lack of family and community support systems. Lack of skills and education is also an important factor contributing to this. We have seen earlier how women have little or no access to land, water, cattle and housing. This restricted access in turn means lesser livelihood opportunities. Further restricted mobility, low literacy rates mean that women cannot diversify into other activities. Most of the women in the present study are involved in agricultural wage labour and very few have other non farm sources that they could depend on.

### ***Engagement in wage labour***

Table 15 shows that almost 80% of the women are engaged in some kind of labour or the other. Only about 20% of the women are not involved in wage work either due to old age or infirmity.

## *Agriculture Labour*

Agriculture labour of course is what most of the women are involved in. Tables 16- 19 show us the kind of work women engage in and the total number of work days available in a year. Findings show that on an average women do not get gainful employment for more than 100 days in a year. Table 16 shows that the average annual wage earnings of a woman is less than Rs 4000/ i.e. way below the official BPL figure.

Table 17 shows a caste-wise profile of annual available work days and the corresponding incomes. We do not see much variation in the annual incomes of these women across caste except in the case of Maratha women. This would need a further exploration but what is evident from the oral histories is that many of these women work on their family farms in most part of the agricultural season where they do not earn anything in the form of wages. Women from other caste largely come from landless households and have to fend for themselves all through the year. However for this one needs to relate it to the data on landholding of the families in which they reside with their work pattern.

Table 18 shows availability of work according to work type. We see here that maximum number of women are involved in agricultural labour work. The total number of work days in a year per woman is 109 and the share of agriculture labour work is 95 days. We see here that very little of women's work is skilled based. A very small number for instance is engaged in grape farm work although there are several grape farms in these villages. Similarly, few of them can engage in non farm activities. Diversification becomes difficult for women with their restricted mobility. In fact it here that intervention is most needed if women have to enhance their incomes and work opportunities. Skills and support required for diversification therefore would go a long way in the economic security of these women.

Table 19 shows us the availability of work within and outside the village. Most of the women have been working within the village although not more than 91 days of work has been annually available within the village. This again is indicative of the restrictions on mobility of single women. Migrating to areas where social and community support would be minimal is not an option that single women would go in for. This restricted mobility further increases their economic vulnerability.

## *Non-Agricultural Activities*

Table 20 shows that not more than 11% or just 16 women are involved in non agricultural activities. Most of these activities do not last round the year. Vegetable vending, running a small hotel, tailoring, rope making are some of the activities that women engage in. All these women said that they found it difficult to sustain this activity round the year. All of these villages fall in the drought prone areas of eastern Sangli district

Vegetable vending is a tedious job. Jaitun did this for several years when she had to wake up at 4.00 a.m rush to Kundal or sometimes even further to purchase the vegetables and then move around and sell it from village to village. She broke her hand in one accident while traveling to get her vegetables and since then she has not been able to do hard physical work. She has set up her own small hotel which runs very well just for a few months in a year. But now there is a larger shop in the village and so is left without customers. To survive she needs credit to diversify from tea making to providing snacks etc. Since has no access to that credit so all she can do is to keep her shop open for long hours or add bidis and gutkha to her items list- something her daughters do not approve of.

where every alternate year is a bad year affecting the availability of wage work. Lack of non- farm activities therefore means insecure livelihoods for these women. Unless the scope for non farm activities is expanded livelihoods of single women would always remain insecure.

Of the 16 women only 7 get income all round the year. The remaining get income for not more than 4-6 months in a year. The sum of their annual incomes amounts to Rs 68,000, which is about Rs 4200/woman/year, which is well within the official BPL mark.

## **Access to Social Security Measures**

### ***Public Distribution System***

Rice, sugar, wheat and kerosene is what is available in the PDS. All of the women reported that they did not get the quota due to them. Almost all of them receive an amount, which is less than the quota due to them. Most of the women get about a litre of kerosene, 10 kgs of wheat, 5 kgs of rice and ½ kg of sugar for a period of one month. For all their remaining needs they have to largely depend on the open market. Table 23 gives us a succinct picture of the ownership of ration cards. Of the entire sample 56 women had ration cards in their names and also names included in the BPL. 58 of them had ration cards in their names but were not included in the BPL lists. 28 of them had neither cards in their names nor were their names included in the BPL lists.

Of those under BPL only 8 of them get the benefit of the Antodaya scheme, which is the targeted PDS, meant for those with an income below Rs 4000. Through the Antodaya scheme, rates of the different ration items are lower than those available to the BPL ratio card holders. So although our data shows that almost 52% or 75 women have an income below Rs 4000/- only a small number benefit from this scheme. In fact when the issue of ration cards was taken up, women responded in a very agitated manner. There is total confusion over how cards are distributed, how benefits for Antodaya are available for some and not for others. This emerged as one of the major demands of the women to be followed up immediately with the district officials.

### ***Access to Government Schemes***

Table 24 shows that only 18 out of the 143 women actually receive any benefit from the government. All these 18 women receive help through the *Sanjay Gandhi Niradhar* Scheme, which is meant for the destitute. The procedures to access these schemes are extremely tedious and often women are not able to gather the various documents to prove their eligibility. Unless these processes are smoothened women will never manage to benefit from these schemes. Most often it is the more resourceful among the village who manage to grab a whole lot of these schemes which are meant for women.

## **Health and Nutrition**

Most of the women reported severe back ailments and body pain. Table 26 shows the different kinds of illnesses that women have. Women reported that they incur a lot of expense on health treatment. Many of them do go in for local remedies and then go to the doctor who often advises injections and saline as the only treatment for all their ailments. Agricultural work is tedious and like most women these women too complained of backaches and related problems. Almost 31.3% women are suffering from body pain like headache and backache. About 16.7% are suffering from multiple illnesses like common colds, fever and backaches and headache.

“I get tired after my hysterectomy operation. I also fall ill but I never miss my daily labour. My husband had attacked me with knives and the scars still hurt. I am very stressed out and this affects my appetite”

In addition to these some of the women have been physically tortured at the hands of their husbands and still carry some of those scars and illnesses associated with it. Hirabai from Bahe was actually attacked by a sickle cutting across her thigh. Although it is 35 years since this

incident she still experiences pain. Other women were underfed during childbirth and are therefore experiencing weakness after so many years. Most of them are anaemic however they are completely unaware of this. They never took iron supplements in their lives despite having gone through traumatic childbirths and blood loss. .

Nutrition is a secondary issue for them. About 62% of the women reported that they eat meals twice a day only. This meal comprises of Jowar roti and dal. Very few women said that they ate vegetables on a daily basis. Consumption of fruits, which was largely bananas, was usually once a week and consumption of other high protein diet like meat was usually not more than once a month. Women who stay alone said that they just didn't feel like cooking two meals for themselves. They very often cooked just once a day- saved that food and ate it over the day and often upto the morning of the next day. Presence of children living with them does provide an incentive to cook regularly, but priority of child's nutrition often is the overriding concern.

Almost all of these women are going through mental strain. Responsibilities of raising their children fear of threats from the husbands and in-laws are things that put undue stress on these women. Many of them spend sleepless nights, have not eaten well for many days and have severe attacks of migraines.

## **Issues of social deprivation**

### ***Social Activities***

Table 27 shows us that most of the women participate in the different social activities. Almost all of them reported that there were no specific restrictions on them that prevented them from attending the different social functions. Participation in Gram Sabhas is generally low for most women and this is evident in this case too. The high participation rates in social functions is also explained by the fact that most of these women have been part of the social movement and are generally an aware lot. Many of them have travelled to Mumbai, Pune and the district headquarters for different rallies and conferences. This awareness and exposure is important from the point of view of their increased participation in different social and political activities.

Widows of course avoid going to religious functions, but they said that the taboos are not so strong as they were some years ago.

Being single, also has some liberatory aspects to it and hence perhaps participation in women's meetings etc is much higher. Many of the women said that they would not have considered going to the various places that they visited had they lived with their husbands. They could do so only because they were on their own and could take such decisions.

### **Fall back options: Loans and Savings**

Table 27 shows as that almost 77% of the women are not involved in any savings activity.

13.2 % women are saving upto Rs 20/month in SHGs amounting to a total annual savings of Rs 240/- .

Maximum number of loans is taken for meeting expenses during illnesses. Loans are also taken during festivals and to meet basic needs of the households. Few seem to have taken loans for any income generation activity.

Women have reported that they have borrowed largely from relatives and big farmers. Some have borrowed from money-lenders too. But very few have depended on SHGs among these women. A large number of these borrowings are on a no interest rate, but there are also loans, which the women take which are at very high interest rates. Some are above Rs 150 %/pa. These are usually loans or advances taken from the big farmers at the rate of Rs 10-15% per month.

With such limited fall back options women's survival depends entirely on what wage work is available round the year. As we have seen there are very few options available for women. Agricultural work is usually not available for more than 100 days on an average. Poverty certainly is looming large.

### About desertion

The reasons for desertion range 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 of 143 women almost 28% of the women have been deserted for about 30 years now. While 21% have been deserted for about 20 years now and about the same who have been deserted for almost 10 years now. The remaining have been deserted for almost 45 years.

“My husband never liked me. I asked him why he deserted me he said that he did so because I was very dark. My in-laws had accepted me only because I came from a rich family, they had plans to kill me later”

“My in-laws were suspicious of me. They kept asking me to bring money from home and would beat me up for that. They also complained to my husband that they saw me with another man. This kept on happening and finally my husband deserted me one day.

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. Table 28 shows that 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.

“My husband remarried immediately. Although our customs don't prevent remarriage I just did not want to go through the trauma once again”

“My children are my priority now. How will another man treat them well”

Table 29 shows that of the 88 deserted women studied only 3 have been legally divorced, the rest of them are still legally married but have been deserted by their husbands. This gives us some insight on the low percentage of legally single women in the region mentioned earlier.

While talking to women, many of them said that in spite of the movement they hardly have ever won the legal battles and only a few among them have managed to get some maintenance at all. This too was an amount that was granted as a one time amount and often was as small as Rs 500. The maximum amount that women gained was about Rs 1000/- Of the 143 women only 11 or 7% of the women have responded saying that they have received some form of monetary compensation. Only 2 women have said that some form of support has been given to raise the children. None of them are receiving any maintenance on a regular monthly basis.

Table 31 looks at the assets these women receive from their marital or natal homes. The 2 deserted women who have received assets from their natal home have got small houses. Of the three widows who have received assets from their marital homes two of them have received small agricultural plots while all three of them have received houses in their names.

It is significant to note here that of the 55 widows only 3 have actually received anything from their marital homes. Most of them had written off their property and returned back to their natal homes. In almost all the cases, widowed women reported that they came back to their villages because they were ill-treated by their in-laws and forced to go back to their natal homes. Many others i.e. 45% were already deserted by their husbands before they were widowed.

## **Poverty Profile**

For the present study incomes comprise of total earnings from their wage work, self-employment if any and also includes earnings from the sale or produce of cattle.

Agricultural wage incomes have been calculated on the basis of the number of work-days as reported by women in the year 2004 (which was not a bad year) and the reported daily wage rate.

Other sources of income such as incomes gained from small enterprises, artisan work etc have also been included in the total incomes of the women. Similarly income from sale of animals has also been included in the total incomes of the women. Although women had not reported the incomes gained from the sale of animals and the sale of produce, we computed these incomes based on the current market rates and the reported production and sale.

We recognise that although none of these figures can be treated as accurate measures for calculating incomes, they are nevertheless indicative of the economic deprivation of these women. Incomes from all sources still indicate that all of these women need to be included in the BPL whereas presently only a small number actually are.

Most of the women have been working as agricultural labourers. The available workdays are on an average not more than 100 days in a year per woman.

Table 33 shows that the income of almost 96% of the women is below the official BPL mark of Rs. 11,000/- and among these 52.4% of the women get an income which is below Rs 4000 a figure far lower than the official BPL figure. The irony however is that in reality only 40% of the women have actually been listed as BPL. On an average women's annual incomes have been about Rs 4500.

Most of the women reported expenses that were higher than the incomes they earned. Fig below is indicative of the yawning gap between the income and expenditure pattern of the women. Table 32 shows that a large part of the expenditure of the women is spent on purchasing food items for survival. Of the Rs 13,258 spent by a woman towards her annual expenses approximately 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. This figure far exceeds the incomes that women earn. Expenditure is also incurred on health needs. In fact in the focus group discussion to cross check some of the findings on income and expenditure women were shocked to see that they had such large income deficits. Many of them reported that they in fact had little or no support from their immediate family. The husbands usually did not provide for the children's education or other requirements. Women therefore had to either borrow money and provide for most of the needs. Some of the women were able to access some of the government schemes or some of the schemes offered by social organisations working in the vicinity. However most of them lived under a perennial mental stress of how they were going to repay the loans in their lifetime.

All of these women depend on agriculture wage labour the availability of which as we have seen is not more than 100 days in a year. This is the state of affairs in a fairly good year. It goes without saying that the situation worsens during drought. The main problem here is that women have little choice in terms of diversifying their livelihood activities. The complete absence of non farm activities also poses a major threat to the livelihoods of these women.

The data points to the need for providing livelihood options that offer a combination of farm based and non farm based activities for the women.

### **Final Comments and Recommendations**

Our Data 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 detailed oral narratives which are not reported in this report in fact show the nature of exploitation of these women both within their households as well as in the community.

The stigma that is attached to being single makes the struggle ever so difficult. From the point of view of children it is very important that the stigma attached to desertion needs to be addressed at an ideological level. For children to see their lone mothers within the realm of 'normal' is very important. The dominant normative ideals of a family with a male and a female cohabiting and the male typically heading the unit needs to be challenged. Unless singlehood is socially accepted, the bias would continue go against deserted women. The struggle for dignity and self respect therefore acquires significance in this context.

For most it has meant a social death and the only reason why they continue to exist is because they have their children to think about. Those who do not have children often have taken on the responsibilities to support their ailing parents or younger siblings. These are the only meanings that they find in their own existence. Women have struggled despite the adversities and come out as survivors. Their association with the *Stree Mukti Sangharsh* Movement has given them the strength and meaning for their existence.

We asked the women how they look at their future and what would help them gain a secure livelihood for themselves and their children, to this women unanimously stated that to live life of dignity they demand

- Ration card in their names (those who still have not benefited from this)
- A housing plot and home of their own
- Access to a small plot of agricultural land and water that irrigates that plot of land
- Support for livelihood activity
- Social security measures like an assured pension scheme for which they do not have to wrestle with the state machinery
- Legislation that makes access to familial property an easy process
- Support for their children for education

These demands are put forth in a nutshell here and for a more detailed discussion on these issues we would like you to refer to the full report of the study.

### **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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

### ***Short-term actions***

Short term needs revolving around material and practical concerns would mean that the target groups needs to be clearly defined. Stree Mukti Sangharsh Movement has in its definition included both deserted women and those whose present status is widowhood but who have been back in their natal homes before they were widowed. The status of all the women who were part of the present study indicates the depth and the nature of deprivation. It is evident from the study that basic material factors such as housing, access to employment and earnings and provision of childcare may be vital in strengthening the position of single women in particular and women in general. They have over the last 15 years been putting forth demands for right to 2000 sq ft. of housing plots for each woman, shelter and the basic civic amenities such as electricity and drinking water, access to community lands for livelihood activity, access to small plots of agricultural lands and the required water for its irrigation, schemes to support their children's education, social security for older women etc.

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.

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

### 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 *gaathan* 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.