

Issues and Concerns of Deserted Women in Maharashtra

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Two studies done at different times in two different parts of Maharashtra on women who have been forced out of the marital home or chose to walk out due to violence, show that women's expectations from marriage and tolerance for violence have changed. The men and their families on the other hand continue to behave in regressive and patriarchal ways while expecting the women to conform to traditional norms of the "good wife and mother". It is also clear that given their increasing numbers and plight, the state government can no longer afford to neglect these women. At the same time, women's rights organisations and civil society must join them in helping to build a culture of resistance.

A number of terms are used interchangeably for women who have been forced out of their marital homes or in some cases have chosen to step out – single women, cast-away women, thrown away women or *parityakta-taklelya striya*. Whatever the term, the implication is often degrading and the numbers of such women appear to be increasing. The recent National Sample Survey (NSS) data of the 61st round (2004-05) shows the extent of female-headed households¹ to be about 11%. According to the sociocultural tables of Census 2001 the total percentage of widowed and divorced/separated women to the total female population in the age group of 10-80 years and above is 10.95%. There have been a few studies done in the past, which have tried to understand the plight of these women.

The women's movement in Maharashtra has been consistently raising this issue since the mid-1980s and until the late 1990s, the question of their dignity and material deprivation was consistently taken up with the state authorities. Some major achievements, such as recognition of their singlehood through allocation of separate ration cards, priority in pension schemes, allocation of housing plots in some districts and more importantly, recognition of the mother as a parent for all official purposes can be attributed to these efforts.

SOPPECOM² along with the Women's Studies Unit of Tata Institute of Social Sciences and the Women's Studies Centre, University of Pune did two studies in 2005 and 2008, respectively on the question of single women. Both these studies were in association with women's organisations in the areas of Pune and Sangli.³ Here we briefly present the findings of the two studies done at different times and in different districts of the state.

The Study Area: The first study completed in 2005 was done in the three tehsils of Sangli district – Walwa, Kadegaon and Khanapur and the second study completed in 2008 was done in the Daund tehsil of Pune district and in one ward of Pune city.

Methodology and Tools: We chose to view desertion and singlehood as part of the patriarchal context and not as a problem that is exclusive to a category of women. Thus single women, becomes a broad and inclusive category of those who have been deserted by their husbands, have been widowed or have never married. Thus devdasis, sex workers, etc, who are forced to remain single would also fall into this broad category. Though the intensity and nature of the problems would vary for each of these groups, they nevertheless share several experiences. For the purpose of our study we chose to focus on women who were thrown out of the

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marital relationship largely in violent circumstances and those who were widowed.

The reasons for desertion would include inability to produce a male child, infertility, inadequate dowry from the natal home, or simply the inability to fulfil the role of a *sati savitri* or the normative woman.

For a “good woman” to be qualified as thus, her life cycle should necessarily progress from being a virgin daughter to a chaste and dutiful wife, daughter-in-law and a mother under the sanction of her father, husband and son, respectively. If this trajectory is followed then she brings honour to the family. Womanhood as seen within this normative framework is suddenly challenged in the absence of a man either through desertion or widowhood (Chakravarti 1998). These realities then pose a challenge to men and the society at large, as the question of their identity and sexuality becomes a matter of concern. The status of the husband ultimately determines the status of the woman.

Moving on to how we look at single women – are they victims or are they survivors? Our analysis understands these women not only as victims of patriarchal structures but also as agents for challenging patriarchy and the conception of the normative woman. These women have, in fact, emerged as independent persons taking charge of their own lives. Women’s agency is less understood in the context of desertion or any form of deprivation. Perhaps these women would not have chosen to get out of these martial relationships had they not been subjected to a great deal of violence, but nonetheless they have made a statement by saying that they will not tolerate it anymore.

Investigation Process, and Data Analysis

At the outset we need to clarify that both the studies were done in response to the issues raised by the local women’s groups regarding desertion and widowhood. The nature of enquiry therefore is within a limited framework of assessing the extent of desertion and of material and sociocultural deprivation among these women.

The first study (2005) was done in the three talukas of Sangli district where the Stree Mukti Sangharsh (SMS) Chalwal (Women’s Liberation Struggle Movement) was very active. In-depth interviews were done with 143 deserted and widowed women who were active members of the SMS.

The second study in Pune district (2008), was an extensive one and was done in two stages. The first involved total coverage of all the households in the selected villages and slums. The second stage involved a detailed analysis of the nature of desertion and hence the women identified from the first round of the study were interviewed in detail. For the first stage of the study in Daund our sample comprised 10% which amounted to 11 villages in the taluka. The criteria for selecting the villages included the percentage of scheduled castes (scs) and scheduled tribes (sts) therein, the child sex ratio in the area and the extent of irrigated/non-irrigated areas in the taluka. However, within these strata the selection was entirely decided on the basis of the strength of the women’s organisations there and whether they could pursue further activity on this issue. The total number of households covered in Daund was 5,558 to study the extent of desertion and

254 single women were interviewed to understand the nature of desertion.

In the Ghole Road ward of urban Pune, we selected 16 slum settlements where the local organisation, the Molkarin Sanghatana,⁴ a domestic workers’ organisation was active. These are mixed caste slums and there was no stratification done while selecting the sample here. The total number of households covered across these *vastis* (settlements) was 4,402 and 218 single women were interviewed. Our total sample size for both the places together covered 9,962 households for the study on the extent of desertion and in-depth interviews with 472 single women for the second level of study. We had two sets of data before us, one set was largely quantitative in nature, and the other, was a combination of qualitative and quantitative. Our data analysis has been around the variables of caste, and age primarily, but we have also looked at the village context for certain aspects in our analysis.

Whereas the quantitative data gives a sense of numbers and the scale of deprivation, the qualitative data leads to an understanding of desertion, its reasons and more importantly the women’s own struggles to make their lives meaningful. This article highlights their social and material deprivation and their struggle for survival.

Major Findings

Extent of Desertion: In Daund taluka, 50% of the households studied, belonged to the open castes, which included Marathas and brahmins and the remaining 50% belonged to the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), sc, st, Denotified and Nomadic Tribes (DNTs) and Muslims.

In Pune city 43.8% were from the DNT and the OBC. About 18% were from the sc, 24% were from the open castes and 4.3% population belonged to the Muslim community.

The data on extent of desertion was analysed looking both at the female population as well as its spread over the total number of households in the sample.

Table 1 shows the number of deserted, widowed and divorced women to the total female population, and together they account for 8.5% of the total female population. The percentage of these three categories to the ever married female population (married, divorced/separated, widowed and deserted) is as high as 17% and warrants attention.

Table 2 presents the marital status for the Pune urban area. The deserted and widowed women account for 5.4%

Table 1: Marital Status of the Population – Daund

Marital Status	Female	Male	Total
Married	7,283	7,238	14,521
Unmarried	4,773	6,787	11,560
Widowed	1,160	190	1,350
Separated/divorced	12	28	40
Deserted	329	0	329
Single men	0	16	16
No response	3	2	5
Total	13,568	14,253	27,821

Single men here refer to those who have deserted their wives.

Table 2: Marital Status of the Population – Ghole Road Ward, Pune City

Marital Status	Female	Male	Total
Married	4,391	4,352	8,743
Unmarried	4,081	5,225	9,306
Widowed	1,335	121	1,456
Separated/divorced	11	12	23
Single men	0	19	19
Deserted	240	0	240
No response	7	7	14
Total	10,065	9,736	19,801

and 30% of the households covered. This is higher than what we saw in the context of Daund. Following the same exercise as we did in Daund we see that of the total ever married female population the percentage of women from the three categories is 26%.

Caste and Desertion

In Daund, we looked at the percentage of desertion in proportion to the population from the respective castes. Table 3 shows caste-wise percentage of deserted women. Here we find that the highest incidence is among the Muslim (9.16%) followed by the SC (8.18%) and the DNT (7.09%) households. In the urban context too similar figures are seen in for desertion. A large percentage of desertion is among the SCs, i.e., 7.2% and the DNT (5.9%) particularly the *Vadar* community in this case. These are migrant

Table 3: Percentage of Deserted Women within the Caste – Daund and Ghole Road Ward

Caste	Daund			Ghole Road Ward		
	No of Households	No of Deserted Women	Percentage within the Caste	No of Households	No of Deserted Women	Percentage within the Caste
Open caste	2,795	134	4.79	1,087	42	3.86
OBC	499	31	6.21	350	19	5.43
SC	892	73	8.18	820	59	7.20
ST	108	6	5.56	99	4	4.04
DT	141	10	7.09	1,414	83	5.87
NT	973	61	6.27	178	6	3.37
Muslim	131	12	9.16	189	11	5.82
Christian	3	0	0.00	12	1	8.33
No response	16	2	12.50	253	15	5.93
Total	5,558	329	5.92	4,402	240	5.45

DT: Denotified Tribes; NT: Nomadic Tribes.

communities from Andhra Pradesh with a very high incidence of alcoholism among the men. Most of the women engage in domestic work in the neighbouring middle class areas. The proportion of deserted women among the open castes is comparatively less (4.79% in Daund and 3.86% in the Ghole Road ward) and the main reason for this is under-reporting.

The linkage between caste and desertion is complex. The lower percentage of desertion among the open castes can be interpreted as due to under-reporting owing to social pressures or lesser freedom for these women to come out of their violent relationships. Similarly the higher percentage for the other castes suggests less stringent social norms to opt out of their violent marriages. The higher percentage of Muslim women needs to be understood in the context of the Muslim personal law and requires a more in-depth and focused enquiry.

Age and Desertion

In the Sangli study 50% of the single women were in the age group of 26-45 years, in Daund 25% were in the age group of 15 to 29 years and 54% in the age group of 30-45 years.

In Pune city too we found a similar picture indicating a fairly young age profile of deserted women. In the age group 46-64 years there were only 14.9% and in the age group of 65+ there were only 5.2% deserted women in Daund. This low percentage in the post-45 age group needs to be investigated further as it suggests that either mortality rate is higher among deserted women or that they choose to go back to their husbands or that it

is a generational issue where violence was tolerated. The younger age profile is indicative of recent changes in the marital aspirations of men and women and the transition in the family resulting from larger sociocultural and economic changes. Both these findings call for a more detailed analysis linking the macro to the micro contexts.

Education and Desertion

In Sangli, 65.7%, in Daund taluka 52% and in urban Pune 43.17% of the single women were non-literate. The remaining numbers are largely in the category of secondary schooling. It also shows that although they are young none of these women have studied beyond the seventh standard. None except one in Daund is a graduate despite the younger age profiles and proximity to Pune city. These levels of education leave the women with few options to earn their livelihood.

In Sangli, 28% of the women had been deserted for about 30 years, 21% had been deserted for about 20 years and the same percentage for 10 years, the remaining 30% had been deserted for almost 45 years at the time of the study. In Daund about 20% of the women had been deserted for four or less years, but the rest, which is about 80%, had been single women for longer. Most of them said that they did not or could not continue in the exploitative relationship for long.

This contradicts the most favoured argument of the authorities, that desertion is a temporary phenomenon and hence deserted women cannot be established as a category deserving support. This argument has been consistently used by the state government for not providing any benefits to these women.

Reasons for Desertion

The reasons for desertion in Sangli were primarily related to alcoholism, wife-beating, lack of a male heir or complaints of inefficiency at domestic work, suspicion of extramarital affairs, property-related matters, widowhood, sexual inadequacy, etc. Similarly, in rural and urban Pune too a similar pattern emerged. Table 4 is indicative of the reasons or what we may call as the

Table 4: Reasons for Desertion – Daund and Ghole Road Ward, Pune City

Reason for Desertion	Daund	Ghole Road	Total	Percentage of the Total Number
Second marriage or extramarital relationships of husband	63	28	91	19.28
Alcoholism and harassment	51	66	117	24.79
Husband not willing to live with her	25	0	25	5.30
Mental and physical torture by husband and his family	22	21	43	9.11
No male child or infertility	22	12	34	7.20
Demands for dowry	15	4	19	4.03
Illness of the husband	12	6	18	3.81
Suspicion	10	8	18	3.81
Illness of the wife	7	6	13	2.75
Attempt at sexual harassment by other family members	6	0	6	1.27
Child marriage	6	0	6	1.27
She did not want to live with her husband	2	0	2	0.42
Unemployment of husband	2	12	14	2.97
Other reasons	11	55	66	13.98
Total	254	218	472	100.00

manifestations of the patriarchal system. While acknowledging that these reasons are not isolated and that often a combination of these leads to the woman finally being thrown out or choosing to opt out, we felt that there was value in seeing some of the key triggers as perceived by the women for the break-up in the family.

Alcoholism and the resulting harassment were cited as the key reasons for desertion by 25% of the women. In many cases women said that when they returned to the marital home after a visit to their natal homes (for a festive occasion) they were simply asked to leave. Apart from this, women have also cited the husband's second marriage and extra-marital relationship as the main reason for the break up. One of them said that on returning to the marital home she found her husband had married a salaried woman who was contributing financially to the household and thus she was forced out. This instrumentality of women shows how patriarchies are so accommodative.⁵ Here the fact that the woman goes out and works is permissible since there is an economic value to it. In other cases we have seen suspicion as the major reason for men to disallow their wives from going into the public arena and eventually being the cause for desertion as well.

Not producing a child or worse not producing a male child or rather producing only girl children has also been a source of discontent leading to desertion. In this sample we have 7.2% women being forced to leave as they could not produce a male child or for reasons of infertility.

The reasons for desertion do not vary across caste, but experiences of being alone would differ for those from the open castes and those belonging to the other castes. We do see some variations in opportunities for work, extent of poverty, and the less understood area of identities and security.

While talking to these women we realised that just as men were exploitative and demanding in their relationships, women did not want to tolerate ill-treatment in the house. Many of the marriages have in fact broken within as early as four or five days or in a month's time of the wedding taking place. Women's expectations of marriage have undergone a change. This perhaps led the women to take early decisions to leave.

The reasons however indicate that men and the marital families have not really changed in terms of their expectations from the new bride. Demands for dowry, and the expectation that she should manage the household and farm capably, etc, are very much the norm. Incapability to fulfil these household responsibilities either in terms of producing a male child, or satisfying the sexual needs of the husband leads to tumultuous marriages. Perhaps the younger women are unwilling to accept this anymore. Men remarry, have more than one spouse, indulge in several extra marital affairs and continue to expect women to follow the age old norm.

Violence and Desertion

In both Sangli and Pune we found that violence forms the basis of the marital relationship. The relationship breaks down if violence reaches a point beyond which the women cannot or refuse to tolerate it. Harassment both by the in-laws as well as the husband, therefore, is cited as an important reason for desertion. In fact it is implicit in almost all the cited reasons.

Women's Sexuality and Desertion

In Sangli, Daund and in Pune city we found the woman's sexuality and reproduction issues also to be a ground for desertion. Wherever these were in question and outside the normative construct of the woman, desertion has taken place for, e g, the husband complaining that she is infertile or that she could not produce a male child, or that she was ugly.

Women as Victims of and Women as Forced Accomplices in the Patriarchal Project:

In almost all of these cases the second wives, the mothers-in-law or the "other woman" expressed solidarity with the man. This is a vivid example of how patriarchy re-establishes itself through its own victims. The parents of the men accepted all his extra-marital affairs and second marriage. In none of the cases did the women say that their in-laws supported them or that their sisters-in-law expressed sympathy. In fact, they were very much a party to the exploitation of these women. This only goes to show just how strongly entrenched patriarchy is and how difficult it is for women to find a common rallying point to fight against it. It also indicates how difficult it is for women to identify with other women simply because the primacy of their relationships to their men and their families becomes ever so important in an insecure, patriarchal and gender discriminatory society. Many of the women we interviewed in fact said that ill-treatment by their in-laws was the main reason why they chose to leave the household. Some also said that if there was a possibility of staying separately then they would have thought of staying on in their marriages.

Across Castes

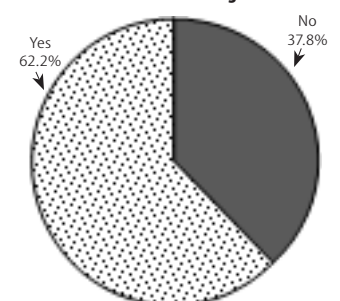
The open castes have largely prohibited remarriage by custom. The scs and obcs do allow for remarriage, but the reality is that the women prefer not to remarry. They chose not to remarry citing reasons like having to look after the children from the earlier marriage, social attitude to remarriage, the loss of claim to the earlier husband, low chance of conjugal happiness in second marriages and more importantly, that they did not want to go through a similar experience again. There are chances that a man who may agree to marry a single woman may also have a number of drawbacks (bigamy, widower, already having children, alcoholic, ill-health, etc).

Business as Usual for Men

In most of the cases in our study the men married not just once but twice or even thrice. They often had open sexual relationships either within the household with their sisters-in-law or outside the house.

This Chart 1 shows that for men to marry immediately after deserting their wives is acceptable. In Sangli 60% and in Daund 62% of the women said that their husbands married after deserting them. Those among the 37%

Chart 1: Husband's Remarriage – Daund



who reportedly did not marry after deserting their wives, had in fact been married twice or thrice before.

Table 5: Remarriage of the Husband Daund and Pune City

Husband's Second Wife	Daund	Ghole Road Ward, Pune City	Total
Unmarried	96	39	135(51.5%)
Deserted woman	13	17	30(11%)
Widow	2	4	6(2.3%)
No information	47	44	91(34.7%)
Total	158	104	262(100%)

been unmarried, 11% married women who were deserted and 2.3% men married widows.

The second marriages of these men have also taken place with some of the closest relatives of the deserted wives for, e g, her close cousin or sometimes even her sister. The rules (unwritten but powerful) of remarriage differ for men and women in some castes. Usually a man's remarriage is socially sanctioned irrespective of caste or community and parents are willing to marry off their daughters to men who have deserted their wives or who have illicit relationships with other women.

Life after Desertion

After desertion the woman belongs neither to the marital home nor to the natal one. This uncertain status leaves the deserted women a lot more vulnerable than even widows. At one level there is relief from the torture that she faced at the hands of her in laws and husband till then, but she now has to face a different set of social and material challenges. The first change is the physical relocation. Marriage itself relocates women and by the time the woman learns the ways of life in a new home, she is forced out of that house back to her natal home where she is rarely welcome.

Sometimes her brothers are supportive but most often they are not and many of the women in our study had to give away their entire incomes to the brother in return for the shelter of the natal home.

Legal Constraints

Only 5.5% of the women in our study were legally divorced. In Sangli only about 14% women actually were able to reach legal aid while 86% either refrained from doing so or simply did not have the means to do so. Almost all the women we spoke to in different villages and vastis preferred not to go in for divorce. Women have often cited a couple of reasons for this: (a) the legal procedure is too complicated as it involves hiring lawyers and paying bribes to different agencies, (b) there is always hope atleast in the initial period of going back to their husbands, and (c) being a deserted woman is less of a social stigma than being a divorcee.

Despite the availability of free legal aid many of the women have not filed cases for maintenance either. Of all the women interviewed only 12.2% had filed cases in the court. These cases have been mostly for maintenance or for a share of the marital property. Only one case each had been filed for divorce and for bigamy, respectively.

Most of the women do not have financial support or have received only one-time support from their husbands. This is

Table 5 looks at the remarriage choices of the men. This information was given by the deserted women. In both Pune city and in Daund taluka, 51% of the men married women who had

indicative of the procedural and sociocultural barriers that women face in accessing the law. The procedural barriers need to be addressed through changes in the implementation of various laws while the struggle for changes at the socio-cultural level needs far more effort and sustained work on the part of women's rights organisations.

The Chart 2 for Pune city clearly shows how little women benefit from legal procedures. Only five of the women receive a monthly compensation of not more than Rs 400-500 with very small amounts given to women.

In Sangli too women said that they were granted a one-time amount which was often as small as Rs 500. The maximum amount that the women gained was about Rs 1,000. Of the 143 women only 11 (or 7%) said that they had received some form of monetary compensation. Only two women said that some form of support had been given to raise the children. None of them are receiving any maintenance on a regular basis.

In Sangli of the 88 single women studied only three had been legally divorced, the rest of them are still legally married but have been deserted by their husbands.

Living Arrangements

The system of patri-local residence has the effect of isolating women. After marriage, a woman is forced to leave her natal home and shift to the husband's house. For a woman adjusting to this new situation is often an uphill task. Countering violence and ill-treatment from her husband and his family in a new location without any support often means that women go back to their natal homes for support. The natal home is often not willing to take her back for reasons ranging from poverty to social disapproval. It is the living arrangements, which however indicate the support systems the woman may have in these circumstances. In Daund we saw that a large number of women went back to their natal villages and stayed initially with their parents or brothers. Gradually they move out into independent households in the natal village.

Tables 6 and 7 show the living arrangements for single women. In Sangli most of the women, i e, 80% of them were residing in

Chart 2: Monthly Compensation – Ghole Road Ward, Pune City

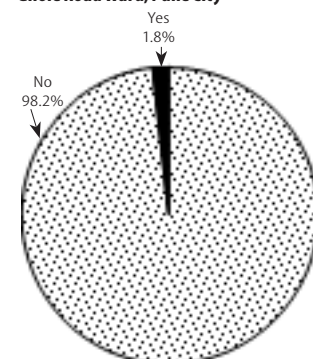


Table 6: Residence in Joint Family, Sangli, Daund and Ghole Road Ward, Pune City

Marital Status	In Joint Family	Independent	No Response	Total
Sangli	57 (39.86)	86 (60.14)	0	143
Daund	128 (50.39)	126 (49.61)	0	254
Ghole road ward, Pune city	142 (65.14)	72 (33.03)	4 (1.83)	218
Total	327 (53.17)	284 (46.18)	4 (0.65)	615

Table 7: Village of Residence, Sangli, Daund and Ghole Road Ward, Pune City

Marital Status	Marital	Natal	Independent Village	No Response	Total
Sangli	11	115	17	0	143
Daund	7	231	16	0	254
Ghole road ward	28	178	4	8	218
Total	46	524	37	8	615

their natal villages. Only 7.6% women were residing in their marital villages while 11% were staying in villages that were neither their natal nor their marital homes. Although most of the women are in their natal villages 60% lived in independent households and 40% lived in joint families and 11.8% of the women live in neither their marital nor their natal villages. In Daund most of the single women went back to their natal villages and some were residing in joint families. Here we saw that 49% of them were staying in joint families in their natal villages. However women reported that though they shared the same roof they tried to maintain different kitchens.

In the urban case, 65% of the women continued to stay with their natal family and 33% stayed in separate homes. The constraint of space is already an important issue in urban areas. Therefore, although these women would have preferred to stay separately, financially it is impossible for them to do so. Most of these women live in houses which do not measure more than 80-100 sqft and often there are more than five to six members living in the same house.

Employment Opportunities

Women’s overall access to property clearly indicates reduced self-employment opportunities. Most of them have to engage in wage labour, which is of a seasonal nature. The lack of access to property, low literacy rates, burden of domestic work and care of the children all leads to reduced bargaining power in employment options.

Table 8 indicates that about 80% of them are engaged in some form of labour of whom again 75% are involved in agriculture, largely indicating that these women have very few choices.

Table 9 indicates that on an average, women in this area that is considered prosperous do not have gainful employment for more than 181 days in a year (Daund) and 109 days (Sangli), respectively. They are able to earn an annual income of around Rs 6,124 and Rs 3,449, respectively.

Table 9: Days of Employment and Wages in a Year from Wage Labour

Study Area	Sangli	Daund
Number of women engaged in labour	114	204
Total days of work available in a year	15,461	37,058
Available days in a year/woman	109	181.7
Total wages/year (Rs)	4,93,331	12,49,392
Annual income from wage labour/woman/year (Rs)	3,449	6,124.5

Table 10 indicates the fragile nature of their work. A large number of these women worked in the unorganised sector. Of the 254 women from Daund, 75% engaged in agricultural labour and of 218 women from Pune, 61% worked as domestic labourers.

Property Rights

In Daund more than 50% women came from landless households. Because of the poor economic status of their natal families, they were also married into poorer households and hence the incidence of landlessness in the marital families was as high as 50%. In such a situation, women are unlikely to hold property and 82% of the

Table 10: Occupation-wise Break-up – Daund and Ghole Road Ward, Pune City

Occupation	Daund	Ghole Road Ward, Pune	Total
Agriculture labour	193	0	193(40.8)
Domestic labour	1	135	136(28.8)
Household work	22	28	50(10.5)
No work	12	15	27(5.7)
Other labour	15	3	18(3.8)
Private service	4	9	13(2.7)
Self-employed	1	10	11(1.6)
Construction work	0	10	10(2.1)
Government service	4	4	8(1.6)
Artisan	1	0	1(0.2)
Education	1	0	1(0.2)
Sweeper	0	4	4(0.8)
Total	254	218	472

In the urban context, 85% of the women did not own a house. Of the 34 women who lived on rent, 12% had to pay rent between Rs 500 and Rs 1,000 month.

Table 11 shows that only 18.6% of women from Sangli and Pune city had self-owned houses and 59% stayed in joint family-owned houses.

Table 11: House Ownership: Sangli, Daund and Ghole Road Ward; Pune City

Housing	Sangli	Daund	Ghole Road Ward, Pune	Total
Joint family-owned	65	209	148	422(68.62)
Self-owned	34	45	33	112(18.21)
On rent	28	0	34	62(10.08)
Encroached	9	0	1	10(1.63)
No information	7	0	2	9(1.46)
Total	143	254	218	615

Intersection of Desertion and Poverty

What we found in most of the cases was that poverty also had an important role to play in desertion. If we look at the data on land-ownership we see that a large number of women came from households that had little or no ownership of land and a larger number of them had been married into landless or marginal households. These reasons have to be explored further especially in the larger context of globalisation and households being deprived of the resources on which they survive; Men from landless households are forced to migrate and this transition brings with it a change in the family as well.

But the added dimension of poverty also means that the men are not able to provide maintenance and the women are therefore forced to fend for themselves, their children and in many cases even the parents. For women this means the burden of supporting themselves and their children and an additional expense either in the form of their own labour or cash to the household where they live.

We have seen how living arrangements, legal constraints, employment opportunities and access to property indicate deprivation and isolation of single women. There are very few opportunities for the single woman to come out of this trap and lead a meaningful life. Much of her life is a struggle for survival.

Social Security Measures

In Daund 40% women had ration cards in their names, but the below poverty line (BPL) percentage is as low as 22. This, despite the fact that their annual incomes often do not exceed the Rs 11,000

mark in the rural areas and Rs 25,000 in urban areas. They do not have either land or house in their name and neither do they own assets that can be categorised as disqualifiers for BPL.

Table 12: Caste-wise Break-up of Ration Card Holding – Ghole Road Ward, Pune City

Caste Group	Number of Women	Number of Women Having Self-owned Ration Card	Percentage of Women Within the Caste
DT	104	41 (51)	39.4
Muslim	6	0	–
Christian	1	0	–
No response	8	2 (2.5)	25.0
NT	2	1 (1.3)	50.0
OBC	6	4 (5.0)	66.7
Open	33	17 (21.5)	51.5
SC	55	14 (17.7)	25.5
ST	3	0	–
Total	218	79.0	36.2

(Figures in parentheses denote percentages to total number of ration card holders.)

Table 12 shows that in Pune city of the 79 women who had ration cards in their name 51% belonged to the DT, 21% to the open castes and 17.7% to the SC.

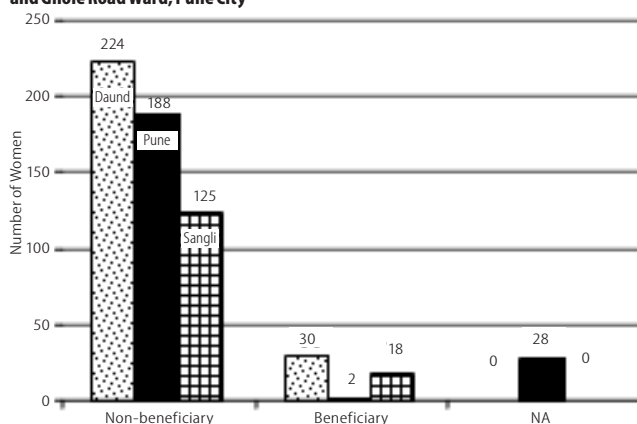
In Pune city the situation was even worse with only 8.7% of the women in the BPL category (Table 13). Most of them resided

Table 13: Caste-wise Name under BPL – Ghole Road Ward, Pune City

Caste Group	Total Number of Women	Name under BPL	Percentage to the Total Number
DT	104	9	8.7
Muslim	6	1	16.7
NT	2	1	50.0
OBC	6	0	0.0
Open	33	3	9.1
SC	55	4	7.3
ST	3	0	0.0
No response	8	1	12.5
NA	1	0	0.0
Total	218	19	8.7

within joint families and hence did not qualify for the BPL category. In a study on widows Jean Dreze has suggested looking at the nutrition, mortality and morbidity data (in the case of widows) as incomes and expenditure often may get hidden within the household of residence.

Chart 3: Benefits from Government Schemes – Sangli, Daund and Ghole Road Ward, Pune City



Benefit from Government Schemes

If we look at Chart 3 for Sangli, Pune and Daund a majority of the women were non-beneficiaries of government schemes.

Table 14 shows us a caste-wise breakup of the benefits of the scheme for Daund. Only 11% women had been beneficiaries of some government scheme and 89% women had not received any benefit of any of the schemes. Of the 11% of the

beneficiaries, 23% were SC women and 8% were open caste women.

The major reasons cited for this by the women are: procedural delays, demand for innumerable documents, bribes to be paid and uncooperative local political agencies.

In the case of Pune city, 86% of the women did not benefit from any such schemes. In fact, the percentage of beneficiaries is as low as 0.9%.

Table 14: Caste-wise Benefit of Any Government Scheme – Daund

Caste	Total No of Single Women	No of Women Benefiting by Any Scheme	Percentage
Open	98	8	8.16
SC	60	14	23.33
ST	5	0	0.00
OBC	25	3	12.00
DT	7	0	0.00
NT	47	4	8.51
Muslim	11	1	9.09
NA	1	0	0.00
Total	254	30	11.81

Income and Expenditure

Most data on incomes and expenditure is very difficult to get. Incomes are often under-reported and there are very few ways of assessing the true incomes unless the researcher stays with the households or opts for ethnographic studies over large-scale studies. Our data too does go through some of these problems as is evident from the expenses overshooting incomes. The other problem in assessing the woman's income was also related to her residence in a joint family. Very often she would be giving her entire income to the family and not reporting it. Similarly, she would report the expense but it was not clear whether it was her personal one or it came through the joint pool.

If we look at all these tables together we can see a very clear picture emerging in terms of the women's poverty.

Table 15 gives a picture of the average annual incomes and days of work for Sangli and Daund. The available days of work is in the range of 109 for Sangli and 181 for Daund with average annual income of Rs 3,449 per year per woman in Sangli and Rs 6,124 for Daund.

The situation in the urban context is not very different and we found it difficult to calculate annual income for all the women due to the seasonal nature of their work. Often these incomes were not available throughout the year except perhaps for domestic labour. Table 16 shows the caste-wise annual income

Table 15: Days of Employment and Wages in a Year, Sangli and Daund

Study Area	Sangli	Daund
Number of women engaged in labour	114	204
Total days of work available in a year	15,461	37,058
Available days in a year/woman	109	181.7
Total wages/year (Rs)	4,93,331	12,49,392
Annual income from wage labour/woman/year (Rs)	3,449	6,124.5

Table 16: Caste-wise Annual Income – Daund

Caste	Annual Income (Rs)				Total
	No income	Below 4,000	4,001-10,999	11,000+	
Open	14	72	6	6	98
SC	5	51	2	2	60
ST	1	4	0	0	5
OBC	2	22	1	0	25
DT	1	6	0	0	7
NT	7	35	4	1	47
Muslim	3	8	0	0	11
No response	1	0	0	0	1
Total	34	198	13	9	254

for women in Daund. Of the 254 women interviewed (77%) have an annual income of less than Rs 4,000. Table 17 shows that nearly 82% of the women in Pune city area earned less than Rs 2,000 per month.

The recent NSS⁶ data on household consumption expenditure for 2005-06 shows that per capita spending for rural areas is Rs 360 and for urban areas it is Rs 580 per month. This is very much in accordance with the data we have received for household expenditure in both rural and urban contexts. The under-reporting can therefore be considered to be very marginal.

However, it goes without saying that the poverty trap is a vicious one and the women find it difficult to get out of it. There is an urgent need for better targeted programmes which will go far beyond what the government is doing at present.

These women need additional skills, access to resources such as land and water, credit and importantly schemes or programmes like the rural employment guarantee scheme which can help build these assets for a long-term sustainable livelihood outcome.

Table 17: Monthly Income – Ghole Road Ward, Pune City

Income Class (Rs)	No of Women	Percentage
No income	43	19.72
50-400	16	7.34
401-1000	53	24.31
1001-2000	71	32.57
2001-3000	18	8.26
3001-4000	12	5.50
4000+	1	0.46
Not available	4	1.83
Total	218	100.00

The combined restrictions on ownership of property, employment, residence, remarriage all strongly point towards a need for a social security and support as matter of right. In the absence of state-based social security, what has come in handy has been the familial support and the social networks of women. This we have assessed in the form of living arrangements, intra-household and inter-household support. Women's participation in struggles and collectives has given them the strength and they look forward to this support.

Women's Agency

Her decision to step out of the house too is a sign of woman's agency. Despite the stigma and the cultural barriers, she has stepped out. This is where the understanding of individual agency that counters or challenges the exploitative structures becomes important. What is it that makes it possible for women to overcome these forms of exploitations and act? The question of economic security is important but importantly the dignity and self-respect of the single women is also an area of importance. In Maharashtra *Ektya Vanchit Striyanche Andolan*⁷ (Single Women's Struggle) is making an effort to articulate a culture of resistance. The need for single women to come together and redefine their image as women thus becomes important.

The struggle for identity of single women cannot be divorced from the larger struggle of women in general.

NOTES

- 1 These are defined as households headed by women and do not necessarily include *Single women*, widowed and single women.
- 2 Society for Promoting Participative Eco-system Management is a Pune-based NGO working in the area of natural resources and rural livelihoods.
- 3 In Sangli, the study was done in collaboration with Stri Mukti Sangharsh Chalwal and in Pune district it was done with Navnirman Nyas, and a youth group in Daund taluka and Molkarin Sanghatana, Pune city affiliated to the Lal Nishan Party
- 4 Molkarin Sanghatana works in Pune city and has extensively organised domestic workers in the city for better wages and respect and better working conditions. It is one of the frontal organisations of Lal Nishan Party or the Red Flag Party.

- 5 For a more detailed discussion on accommodative patriarchy, see Prem Choudhary's, "Sexuality, Unchastity, and Fertility: Economy of Production and Reproduction in Colonial Haryana" in M A Chen (ed.), *Widows of India*.
- 6 The 62nd round of NSS on household level consumption expenditure for the year 2005-06.
- 7 It is a platform representing various organisations in Maharashtra that have worked on the question of single women and hope to carry it with renewed vigour.

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