



PRESS RELEASE:

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Report on Farm Widows of Maharashtra Highlights Human Rights Violations; Recommends Urgent State Intervention to Prevent Social and Economic Exclusion

A study released today by **Housing and Land Rights Network (HLRN) India (New Delhi)**, and **Prakriti Resource Centre for Women and Development (Nagpur)** reveals the acute vulnerability of farm widows in India and the multiple violations of their human rights.

The report titled, “**Surviving Stigma: Housing and Land Rights of Farm Widows of Vidarbha, Maharashtra**” was released on the International Day of Rural Women, instituted by the United Nations in 2008 to recognize the critical role and contribution of rural and indigenous women, in enhancing agricultural and rural development, improving food security and eradicating rural poverty. This day is also celebrated as Women Farmers’ Day in many countries across the world.

Background

The western Indian state of Maharashtra accounts for the highest number of farmer suicides in India. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reveals that 2,568 farmers committed suicide during the year 2014 and 3,030 farmers committed suicide in 2015. The region of Vidarbha in Maharashtra has been struggling with worsening drought conditions for the last four decades. Drought, crop failure, and high interest rates contribute to growing bankruptcy and indebtedness of farmers. This has led to an increasing number of farmers committing suicide.

While a large number of male farmers continue to take their lives in desperation, their widows are left to deal with the state, moneylenders, in-laws, and a society that stigmatizes them and denies them their equal rights. There is little documented information on widows and their struggles to claim their rights to the lands that they till and work on, and the houses that they live in with their children.

Widows in India, traditionally and historically, have been ostracized and abused by society. The widows of farmers who have committed suicide experience particularly difficult situations resulting from the added stigma associated with the suicide of their husbands and the difficulty in repaying loans. In addition to the grief, psychological trauma, and shock of the sudden demise of their husbands, these women suffer from financial stress and hardship, and live in great insecurity, worried about their own and their children’s well-being and future.

There is, therefore, an urgent need to develop policy responses that explicitly address the persistent gender inequality and respect, protect, and fulfill the rights of widows within a human rights framework. It becomes critical to assist farm widows (women farmers whose husbands have committed suicide), especially in their extenuating circumstances, to gain access to their homes and agricultural lands. Equitable access to land is a human rights issue and according to General Recommendation No. 34 of the United Nations (UN) Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, on the Rights of Rural Women, “land rights discrimination is a violation of human rights.”

The Study

Given reports of the continued suffering of, and discrimination against, farm widows in Vidarbha as well as the lack of documentation of their concerns, Prakriti, with the support of Housing and Land Rights Network, decided to undertake a study to investigate the living conditions of farm widows, with a focus on their housing and land rights. The study is based on a combination of primary data collection through surveys in four districts of Vidarbha – Akola, Amravati, Wardha, and Yavatmal, and secondary research. The study highlights the physical, mental and emotional suffering, and economic exclusion of farm widows, including drastic changes in the behaviour of their in-laws after the death of their husbands. It also brings to light the impacts of social and state intervention.

Major Findings of the Study

Some of the major findings of the study include:

- **Suffering of widows:** Women reported how they were shunned by family elders and in-laws when they asked for their share in the family house or land, on the pretext that a house cannot be “broken.” Most of them were subjected to abuse and indignity in the marital household. Deep-rooted discrimination against widows, especially with regard to house and land ownership, was revealed as an important issue that needs to be addressed at multiple levels – social, political, and legal.
- **Violence against children:** In a considerable number of cases, women reported that when they demanded their share of property, the safety of their children was at risk.
- **Joint family set-up and patriarchal stronghold on ownership:** Most of the study respondents (88 per cent) reported that at the time of their husband’s suicide, they were staying with their in-laws and husband in the family house, revealing their high dependency on the joint household and common pool of resources.
- **Social alienation, stigma, and ostracism:** The relationship of the women with their in-laws is strained when they demand their access to land/housing and their share of the marital property. Often, they are not included in or invited to family gatherings and events. They face social ostracism, and their ties, even with their extended family, are often severed after the death of their husbands.
- **Acute lack of awareness:** The study highlights that in many cases, widows do not have any information with regard to their family’s landholdings, property papers, or their legal or inheritance rights, resulting in them not making any attempt to secure their rights.

Recommendations

In light of the multiple violations of human rights faced by farm widows, the report proposes the following recommendations to the government and involved agencies:

- Develop, review, revise, and implement laws, policies, and procedures to prohibit and eliminate all forms of discrimination against widows in India. Review legal and regulatory frameworks to ensure that equal rights of widows are clearly specified and enforced.
- Ensure administrative reform processes in the interests of farm widows—at the local, state, and national levels—related to property and land entitlements, with the aim of ensuring their access to and control over housing, agricultural land, property, and equal rights to inheritance.

- Carry out human rights education and training of government officials and law-enforcing agencies on women's rights, to sensitize them on issues faced by farm widows. Such sensitization should enable the officials to address cases of pension, housing, agricultural credit, and ration for widows on a priority basis. Human rights education and awareness, should be promoted at multiple levels, to challenge patriarchal notions and to remove cultural taboos and social stigmas associated with widowhood.
- Establish counselling centres and provide psychological, and where required, clinical counselling to widows to help them cope with the grief and human rights violations they have suffered.
- Support community projects, policies, and programmes that aim to remove barriers to widows' rights to adequate housing, land, property, inheritance, agricultural and economic resources, infrastructure, and social services.
- Recognize women as farmers, and carry out gender-based human rights agrarian reform. This would include facilitating women's access to credit, agricultural implements, secure tenure, and promoting and recognizing collective farming and collective land rights by women's groups.
- Implement all international guidelines and standards, including recommendations by UN treaty bodies and Special Procedures, related to the rights of women, and especially widows. This includes implementing General Recommendation No. 34 on the Rights of Rural Women, issued by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.¹

Prakriti and HLRN hope that all state and non-state actors will implement the recommendations proposed in the report, in order to address the systemic discrimination that farm widows face at multiple levels, and to ensure the realization of their human rights.

The report, *Surviving Stigma: Housing and Land Rights of Farm Widows of Vidarbha, Maharashtra*, is available at:

http://hlrn.org.in/documents/Surviving_Stigma_Farm_Widows_Vidarbha.pdf

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¹ Available at:

http://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/1_Global/INT_CEDAW_GEC_7933_E.pdf