

# Widows fight the odds to regain confidence and become self-reliant

Widows in India are often stigmatised. This is more so in the case of farmer suicides. There is, therefore, an urgent need to create mechanisms to empower widows in the Vidarbha Region and give them the support they need to pick up the pieces of their lives and move forward. Many of them face ostracism and social stigma, emotional and psychological trauma, financial stress and the ordeal of dealing with money-lenders

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The Vidarbha Region of Maharashtra, once famous for its 'white gold' or cotton, has earned the unenviable label of being the 'farmer suicide capital' of India. Since 1995, Maharashtra has recorded thousands of farmer suicides, of which the majority is from Vidarbha. There are many reasons why the Vidarbha Region has proven to be a minefield for farmers, especially those growing cotton. Crop failure, drought, low levels of irrigation and debt due to lack of access to bank credit are just some of the causes.

Within the larger Vidarbha Region, Yavatmal District bordering Telangana has been one of the worst-hit districts, both by farmer suicides and in the last few months, by deaths of farmers due to pesticide poisoning. The district has often been dubbed the 'epicentre' of the farmer suicide crisis by the local press.

While the plight of farmers in Yavatmal District is indeed tragic, an equally tragic but understudied problem is that of the 'farm widows'. Thousands of such farm widows in Vidarbha face myriad problems, including ostracism and social stigma, emotional and psychological trauma, financial stress and the ordeal of dealing with money-lenders.

There is urgent need to create mechanisms to empower widows in Yavatmal and Vidarbha, and give them the support they need to pick up the pieces of their lives and move forward. However, such initiatives are rare. One of the few projects for the welfare of the helpless women is run by the Pune-based non-profit Watershed Organisation Trust (WOTR) and its sister organisation Sampada Trust. The Empowering Women and Children in Distress (WID) Project is operational in Yavatmal District. It was initiated in 2014, and aimed at providing two-fold assistance to 'farm widows' – both emotional and financial. The goal is to not just give the widows a means of livelihood but also help them and their children achieve mental and emotional well-being, a crucial aspect often ignored in the development discourse.

Marcella D'Souza, executive director at WOTR, recalls the challenging circumstances in which the project was implemented. "The widows of Vidarbha faced both social and economic pressures. There is a stigma attached to being a widow in a village in our society. The mental health of a widow's children is also affected. We decided that the women needed immediate monetary assistance and a regular source of income. In addition, they required help to recover their mental and emotional stability. The field team was thus engaged in teaching meditation and providing counselling to the women to help them recover their inner strength. The male staff were sensitive to the women's situation and held meetings outside the homes. We did not want to create problems for them. The emphasis was on being as sensitive as possible and healing the mind, besides helping them to earn a livelihood," she explains.

Vinod Katlam, social development officer with WOTR and connected to the WID Project since its inception, says one of the biggest challenges was to create a sense of confidence and trust in the women. "The village society tends to be sceptical of outsiders. People don't immediately believe that you want to help them, as people from outside, like journalists, keep coming and going. So we had to first win them over and give them a sense that we would support them for the long term."

Until March 2017, the project had reached out to 18 villages in four blocks of Yavatmal District, covering 55 widows and 103 children. Due to the livelihood promotion activities taken up under the WID project, their average income had gone up from Rs 1500 to Rs 3500 a month. Livelihood activities identified by the women themselves were taken up, such as running grocery stores and beauty salons and taking up goat farming. Assistance for agriculture was also given, and the appropriate guidance and handholding provided.

The stories of Chanda Thune and Ramkala Thune, sisters-in-law from Baradgaon Village of



Photos: WOTR

Chanda Thune (left) and Ramkala Thune, sisters-in-law from Baradgaon Village of Yavatmal District, reflect the positive impact of the WID Project on widows in the area.

Yavatmal District bring out the impact of the WID project on the widows of the area. Each of the couples owned 2.5 acres of land which was registered in the names of the men of each household. While the couples themselves worked as agricultural labourers, the land was leased to another farmer at a yearly amount of Rs 1000 per acre. With an annual income of Rs 12000 from all possible sources, they struggled to make ends meet.

Unable to withstand the hardship, Ramkala's husband killed himself in 2013, while Chanda's husband took his own life in 2014. After this, the widows had to fend for themselves. They underwent severe emotional and financial distress. Their children too were devastated and eventually dropped out of school.

Having been identified as needing assistance under WID, the project team noted that both Chanda and Ramkala owned fertile agricultural land with a water canal flowing through it. However, they did not have any means to lift the water from the canal for irrigation. Understanding the problem, they were provided an assistance of Rs10000 each as a revolving loan. With this, the women bought a second-hand diesel pump for Rs 13000. The remaining Rs 7000 was kept as working capital. Besides, they were given training on various aspects of agriculture, like combating pest infestation, practicing organic farming, etc.

In 2016-17, Chanda and Ramkala together harvested 20 quintals of cotton and 10 quintals of tur dal. This earned them Rs 1.1 lakh, which included a profit of Rs 45000. The women are expecting a similar profit from the on-going season.

However, the benefits of the intervention go far beyond increased incomes. Chanda's son has now finished his schooling and owns a small hotel in Ralegaon Taluka of Yavatmal. Ramkala's children are back in school. The women

have built a pucca house (made with good-quality material) for themselves, and got the land deeds transferred to their names. "Thanks to this project, we have been able to gain confidence and self-reliance, which will help us pave the way for a better future," both Chanda and Ramkala say confidently.

(Vikas Prakash Joshi is a communication officer with WOTR, Pune, while Vasant Korde is a livelihoods officer with Sampada Trust, Ahmednagar.)

## When much-needed sensitivity is ...

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Survivors of violence, counsellors and human rights activists share their experiences.

judiciary and healthcare professionals (doctors, nurses, counselors, therapists) social workers, hospital staff (janitors, security guards, technicians, administrative personnel, ward assistants) must treat victims/survivors of violence and assault and their families, friends and supporters compassionately.

Professor Rini Ralte, an academic and president, North East Solidarity Forum, Bengaluru, who assisted the

victim discussed in this article, says, "A senior state government minister and police officers labelled the victim as a sex worker and a beggar and doubted that she was raped. This kind of character assassination is unacceptable and outrageous."

Sadly and shamefully, perpetrators of violence are rarely punished, especially if they are from dominant castes or are socio-economically privileged, senior government officials or in politics, police, members of the judiciary, religious heads, so-called 'celebrities' (in films, theatre, fashion, sport, literature, even media) or have favourable relations with people in such occupations.