

Widows in the sub-standard settlements of Chennai City – Problems and Prospects

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Abstract

Background: Problems faced by widows in India are innumerable. They are discriminated, abused, insulted and neglected by the society. In general, people in India have a different outlook about them. Majority of the population in India does not like the presence of widows during the celebrations of marriage and some auspicious functions of the families. The lives of widows are subjected to deprivation, struggles and various forms of abuses, which makes them disempowered.

Objectives: The objective of this paper is to bring out the sufferings, problems and struggles of widows who live a nightmarish life without basic amenities in the slums of the city of Chennai and further this paper suggests some remedies and possible solutions to NGOs, government and educational Institutions to better the socio-economic living conditions of widows.

Research Methods: The Department of Outreach in Loyola College has been reaching out to three zones of the corporation of Chennai and doing community service in 30 slums. The registered number of widows goes upto 120 at Tenampet slum alone in the corporation of Chennai. Based on the availability of the widows during the day time in their residence, primary data were collected from 50 widows by adopting a convenient sampling method. The descriptive research design was used in this study to document the results.

Results and conclusions: The major findings reveal that widows in slums face multitude of problems. To put an end to such problems, comprehensive set of steps are to be taken by the government, voluntary organizations, social workers, researchers and education institutions. Most of the suggestions are streamlined towards the empowerment of widows which will bring about a change in their socio-economic conditions. Above all, society's attitude towards the widows has to change.

Keywords- Widows, discriminated, abused, neglected, deprivation, problems, disempowered, nightmarish life, basic amenities, slums

Introduction

India is a home to over 40 million widows, who are not only ostracized and neglected but also less cared by the society (www.citizen-news.org/2011). Entering into widowhood is truly a painful process as they are discriminated by the ritual sanctions of the society against them. The moment a woman became a widow, they started experiencing deprivation and restriction. Widows in India suffer from socio-economic problems and also face many emotional disturbances, imbalances and psychological problems.

“The state of widows is characterized by pangs of separation and consequent mental agony, social isolation and economic dislocation”. (Swain et al 2004)

The primary reasons for becoming widows in Tamil Nadu is due to regular consumption of alcohol, which took away the lives of many men. Therefore, the widows in the city of Chennai do not lead a dignified life, but they experience multitude of sufferings and problems. After having lost the bread winner of the family due to various reasons, the widows have to live a nightmarish life. Apart from poor economic conditions, they face abuses at homes and society. The abuses that they face are beatings, oral and psychological, insult and negation of the family members. More so, it is very pathetic to see that they do not have proper basic facilities to lead their life and this has put them to the very poor living conditions. This is the main reasons for widows for the constant sufferings and problems that they face. They could not easily come out of vicious cycle of poverty as they experience ongoing malaise against them.

Statement of the Problem

The slum dwellers in Chennai live a life of suffering from cradle to the grave with the widows bearing the brunt of all these sufferings. The sufferings of widows are beyond comprehension as they live a deprived life, carrying the burden of the children and old people who depend on them. They suffer without even basic amenities and are hardly able to fulfill their daily needs. Particularly, the living condition of widows in slums is very poor. Forced to fulfill the needs of the family and children, their life becomes a constant struggle to find a job, in either formal or informal sectors, due to which their dreams of bringing up their children in a positive way remains a distant dream.

Widows suffer some of the most severe subjugation of their whole lives. Widowed women are harassed, abused, and denied land and livelihood. The widows have to face many kinds of deprivation: economic, social, cultural and emotional. Of all the deprivation the economic deprivation is the most

harmful. “The household headed by widows suffer dramatic decline in per capita income and that the mortality risk of widowhood is higher” (Gopang.N, et al 2012). “Among basic causes of their vulnerability were restrictions on the residence, inheritance, remarriage and employment opportunities of widows”. Jayaprakash Institute of Social Change (2009).

Need and Importance of the Study

Most of the studies carried out so far were done on a macro level and micro level studies relating to the condition of widows in slums are scanty. The growth of urbanizations has been increasing in recent years. As a result, we could see that increased number of slums in the metropolises of India. Due to poverty, unemployment and other factors, the number of widows has been increasing. It is imperative to study the condition of these widows and to direct the government for taking remedial measure.

Widows are usually neglected by the society. After the death of their husband, many of them struggle hard to manage their day to day life and those who have children were the most affected in the society. Most of their husbands die of alcoholism and smoking and it is essential to study the various causes of their death so that it may create awareness among other men who live in slums. Most of the widows find it difficult to educate their children and some of them had to also provide economic and moral support to their parents. Hence it is important to study their living conditions after the deaths of their husband.

The present study is done to clearly analyze, understand and document the problems faced by the widows in Chennai slums. Since the problems of widows are multifaceted, it should be studied holistically covering economic, social, physical and psychological aspects. Therefore it was felt by the researcher that a study on widows in few slums in Chennai city would throw light on their socio-economic conditions and bring out their coping skills.

Objectives of the Study

1. To study the socio-economic conditions of the widows in the slums.
2. To analyse the problems faced by widows

Methodology

The department of Outreach of Loyola College works in three zones in the corporation of Chennai and of which Tenampet slum was studied. There are 120 widows. This research studied 50 widows who were chosen by convenient sampling method. The primary data were collected using self-structured interview schedule. The researcher has used descriptive research design.

Limitations of the Study

The study tries to find socio economic conditions of widows living in Chennai and so the generalization of the findings to other regions in Tamil Nadu may not hold good.

The researcher had to study the problems of the widows which were sometimes sensitive and the rest of the family members were present. The widows had to take time off from their house hold work which was sometimes difficult for them. The researcher also found it a challenging task to collect the data from the urban slum populations.

Results

Table: 1 Income profile of the respondents

Income	No of Respondents (n=50)	Percentage
Below 3000	21	42.0
3001 – 5000	26	52.0
5001 Above	03	06.0
Total	50	100.0

More than half of the respondents (52%) are earning between 3001 – 5000 rupees per month. 42 per cent of the respondents are earning below 3000 rupees per month and this shows that they are unskilled and their conditions is very bad. The widows in slums are left with lot of responsibilities to take care of which is very hard to carry out given their economic conditions.

Table: 2 Occupational profiles of the respondents

Occupation	No of Respondents (n=50)	Percentage
Tiffin Business	03	06.0
Domestic Work	27	54.0
Fish Selling	01	02.0
House Keeping	09	18.0
Office Assistant	03	06.0
Sales Girl	02	04.0
Shop Keeper	5	10.0
Total	50	100.0

More than half of the respondents (54%) have taken up domestic work, which is a testimony that they are unskilled. Therefore they earn less than 3000 rupees per month which puts them vicious cycle of poverty and indebted to money lenders. All these respondents have taken jobs not for time pass, but mainly to earn their livelihoods, without which survival is unimaginable since there is no one to take care of their day to day needs.

Table: 3 Distributions of the Respondents by their Caste

Caste	No of Respondents (n=50)	Percentage
BC	13	26.0
SC	36	74.0
Total	50	100.0

74 per cent of the respondents belong to the SC caste which is an indication that the most number of women victimized to be living without husbands belongs to the SC caste. About 26 per cent of the respondents belong to the BC community.

Table: 4 Religion of respondents

Religion	No of Respondents (n=50)	Percentage
Hindu	37	78.0
Christianity	10	20.0
Muslim	01	02.0
Total	50	100.0

The religion of the widow plays a major role in their lives. 78 per cent of the respondents belonged to the Hindu religion, the highest number. About 20 per cent of the respondents belong to Christianity and the 2 per cent followed Islam.

Table: 5 Years of living together as couple

Living together in Years	No of Respondents (n=50)	Percentage
Below 5 Years	08	16.0
6 – 10 years	17	34.0
11 – 15 years	08	16.0
16 – 20 years	10	20.0
21 – 25 years	07	14.0
Total	50	100.0

Thirty four per cent of the respondents lived together with their husbands for the short period of 6 – 10 years only. About 20 per cent of the respondents lived together with their husbands for the period of 16 – 20 years.

Table: 6 Constant quarrels with the partner at home

Constant Quarrels at Home	No. of Respondents (n=50)	Percentage
Yes	30	60.0
No	20	40.0
Total	50	100.0

Sixty per cent said that they had constant quarrels with their husbands at home while he was alive. However about 40 per cent of the respondents said that they had no quarrels.

Table: 7 Feeling of Depression of the respondents

Feeling of Depression	No. of Respondents (n=100)	Percentage
Yes	28	56.0
No	22	44.0
Total	50	100.0

The majority of the respondents (56%) said that they felt depressed at times. However 44 per cent of the respondents said that they had no feeling of depression.

Table: 8 Facing of Problems in Work Spot

Problems in the Work Spot	No. of Respondents (n=50)	Percentage
Yes	21	42.0
No	29	58.0
Total	50	100.0

Forty two per cent of the respondents are facing problems at their workplace which really needs an attention to take necessary action regarding the issue. However 58 per cent of the respondents do not face any problem at their workplace.

Table: 9 Incurrence of Debt

Incurrence of Debt	No. of Respondents (n=50)	Percentage
Yes	38	76.0
No	12	24.0
Total	50	100.0

Sixty six per cent of the respondents have debts which show that they are having economical problems in their lives. About ¼ of the respondents had no debts which show that they are able manage their family with the come they get.

Suggestions:

After considering the problems faced by the widows in the slums of Chennai, the following steps are recommended to be taken by various stakeholders and change-makers of the society.

Policy related steps to be taken by the Government

- **Rehabilitation Centers** have to be established in each ward of the city so as to aid the widows in various forms.
- There is a need to identify the widows as a special class of citizens, irrespective of their caste and religion but on the basis of their economic condition. This will help the policymakers to bring out special **reservation** in the government sectors for the widows.
- The government should conduct free highly **practical and skill based training** to the widows in the slums to make them small time

self employed entrepreneurs who can earn a living for themselves and their family without depending upon anybody. But the focus of the programs should not be just skill development but also marketing of products, financial management etc which will enable them to earn money out of the skills so acquired.

- Provision of **microloans** can help kick start small businesses in the communities. This would also help in **preventing exploitation** by money lenders and middlemen.
- Due to **poor network** of the widows, they face various challenges when they are denied their basic rights. The government should form strong networks with various organizations working at the grass roots level and seek their views during decision making processes.

Steps to be taken by centers like the Department of Outreach, Loyola College

- Programmes to bring about an **attitudinal change** of the society towards the widows should be conducted on a regular basis to change the mindset of the people.
- Organize awareness on the **rights of widows** in terms of employment, education, family sphere legal and political rights etc.,
- **Networking** between national widows' associations establishing branches in every village, slum and refugee camp with channels of communication to the relevant ministries, will ensure a two-way flow of information and provide a basis for much needed research.
- Inspiring and taking steps to involve **students** to take issues like widow abuse seriously and work on them to find solutions

By Social Workers and Researchers:

- An association for widows has to be established to provide a platform for sharing their problems. This will help in the rehabilitation process.
- Form advocacy groups to work as pressure groups for the well- being of widows.
- Collecting information on violence and sexual abuse towards widows in work places and adhering to strict implementation of laws protecting them.

Suggestions to Voluntary Organizations:

- Help monitor and ensure strict enforcement of the laws on dowry and atrocities against widows.
- Voluntary organizations can take up microfinance related tasks which can be effective, only when it is done at the grass roots level which is very hard for the government to do.
- Establishment of vocational training centers for the widows.

- Provide scholarship to the children of widows for pursuing higher studies.

Conclusion

Though government policies exist to protect the sustainability of widows, most of the time the benefit is not attainable to the widows due to ignorance, corruption and adherence to strict rules and regulations in terms of procedure and producing documents. The government schemes and other welfare measures for rehabilitation of widows should reach in time for the right beneficiaries, so that they are protected from unnecessary stress situations and feel confidence about their socio-economic sustainability. The analysis on the daily income of widows concludes that most of the widows involved in daily wage labour activities are in the poorest income group and are more disadvantaged than those widows involved in self-employment, petty business, garland making and other works in slums of Chennai. Therefore, there is need for providing self-employment opportunities by planning capacity building through job oriented skill trainings, skill upgradation in order to empower them socially and economically. The cases of the widows are evidence to the fact that despite the guaranteed constitutional rights, their struggle for equality and survival continues. To bring this struggle to an end, women have to be empowered and the social discrimination against them has to come to an end.

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