

INDIA'S COVID WIDOWS

A New Humanitarian Crisis

Situational Analysis on Covid Widows in NTR District, Andhra Pradesh, India



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Cover Page Design Syam and Greys N Greens

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

On behalf of Vasavya Mahila Mandali, Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to S. Dilli Rao IAS Collector and District Magistrate NTR District, Andhra Pradesh, India for providing us the data on COVID widows in the district. Without his cooperation this study would not be possible.

My wholehearted gratefulness and respect to the women widows who made this study qualitative possible, who feels pain, grief and sorrow in their life journey, for sharing their shocking stories. Their engagement in the study was – ‘looking through the eyes of widows’ and witnessing the impact of COVID along with suggestions to improve their lives. My gratitude goes to Vijaya Kankanala and Komali counsellors for providing counselling to the COVID widows and timely guidance in upholding their rights.

I appreciate the support rendered by Prof. Subha Gora and Prof. Kranthi Priya of K L University in preparation of this report. My special thanks to Dr. Deeksha Pillarisetty, Medical Director of VMM for providing suggestions on content and offering valuable input.

I whole heartedly appreciate the consistent secretarial assistance provided by the staff of Vasavya Mahila Mandali even during the COVID pandemic in reaching out the widows and providing relief. Thanks to Vijaya Kumar Boddu and Ramanujaiah Gurram for their support throughout the process of this study. I am grateful to Srinivas K, Kuntamukkala Srinivas, Suneetha Rani, Lavanya Kumari and Kuna Sivayya for the support in reaching the widows and for providing timely livelihood support. I shall be grateful to Radhika Ashok, Krishna District Coordinator of Go-NGO Forum, UNICEF, and Rashmi Goparaju, Secretary VMM, for visiting the villages in A. Konduru Mandal and consoling the widows.

Vasavya Mahila Mandali is grateful to HCL Foundation for providing financial support in preparation of this study report and livelihood to COVID widows to restart/ start their micro enterprises after second wave of COVID in 2021. We also thank HSBC CSR wing for supporting the skilling and livelihood of COVID affected families and widows in doing fashion designing courses and for providing commercial sewing machines.

Finally, word of thanks to all respondents who spared their valuable time and cooperated by providing the relevant and required information.

Dr. Keerthi Bollineni,
President, Vasavya Mahila Mandali
Vijayawada, INDIA

26 July 2022

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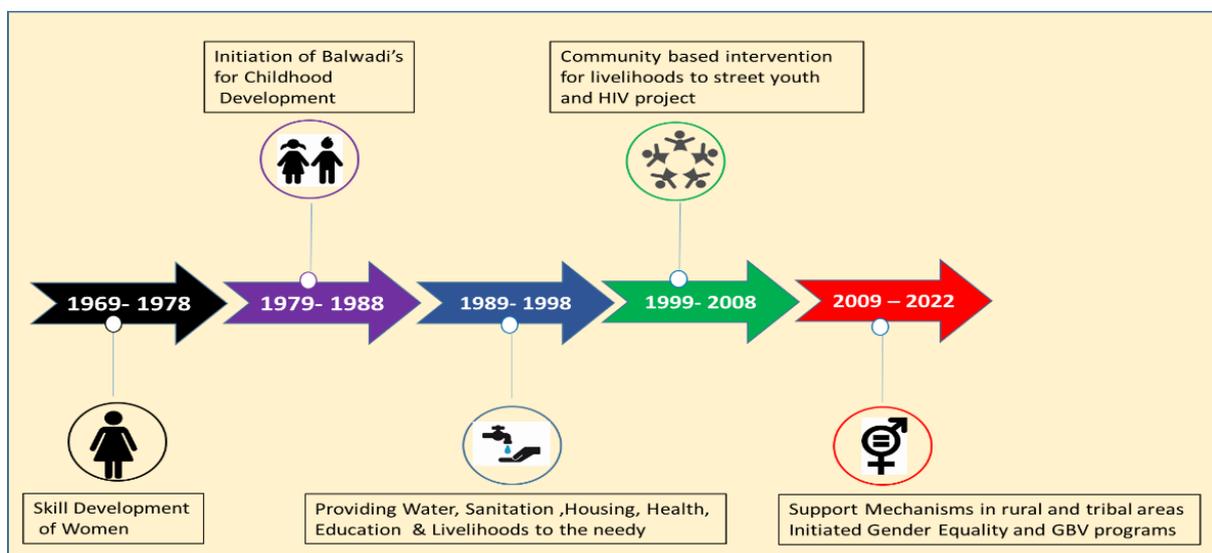
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ABOUT VASAVYA MAHILA MANDALI (VMM)

Vasavya Mahila Mandali (VMM), an NGO, working in the space of empowering women, children and youth has a rich legacy of 53 years. VMM was founded in 1969 in Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh, by Chennupati Vidya, former Member of Parliament and was inspired by the Gandhian principles of justice, social development and equality. From 2018 Dr Keerthi is spearheading Vasavya Mahila Mandali and is instrumental in taking up the task of unfolding the challenges of women in marital discord in the execution of maintenance.

The broad vision of VMM is empowering women, children and families by increasing happiness and ensuring a sustainable society with human values. VMM's work over a span of more than 5 decades is depicted as below

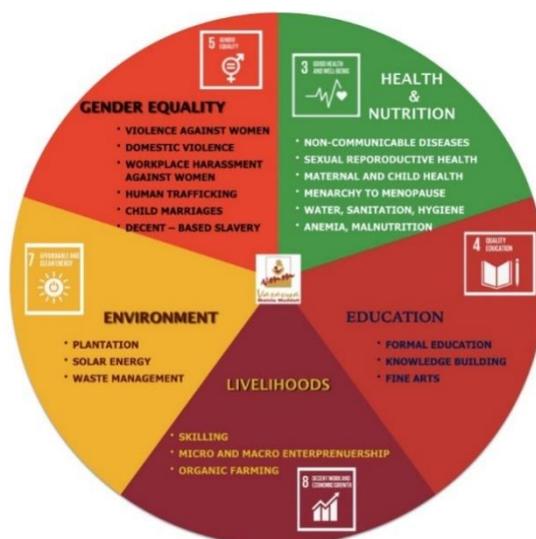
Figure 1 Work over the past 50 years



VMM – Scope of Activities and Outreach

VMM works on a holistic model of creating sustainable communities. It has worked with various government ministries and departments, civic societies, corporates and bilateral agencies. The five key thematic areas which VMM focuses are: Health and Nutrition; Education; Gender Equality; Livelihoods and Environment. Under the various key thematic areas VMM has undertaken programmes and initiatives for making a difference in the lives of different communities.

Figure 2: VMM Thematic Areas of Work in line with SDGs



Research & Publication:

VMM also has a robust Research and Publication vertical which ensures that the community-based initiatives and programmes as well as evaluation studies get properly documented and its findings shared so that the community issues get visibility. VMM also conducts evidence-based research for improving the situation either through policy interventions or with effective implementation by having discussions and meetings at various levels with victims / survivors, their family members, academicians and the service providers.

VMM Outreach

The programmes and initiatives carried on through various thematic areas have impacted thousands of women, girls, men, and boys.

Table 1: VMM Outreach

VMM reach thematic wise 52 years					
Thematic area	Male	Female	Boys	Girls	Total
Health & Nutrition	402,986	409,375	293,005	297,643	1,403,009
Education	601	5,018	6,141	10,541	22,301
Livelihood	7,673	9,369	7,681	7,682	32,405
Human rights	669,303	766,743	98,501	122,825	1,657,372
Environment	184,533	181,668	178,831	174,731	719,763
Total	1,265,096	1,372,173	584,159	613,422	3,834,850

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“Widowhood is a situation of social demise of the husband,” says Mohini Giri, a veteran activist in the fight for Women’s rights and a widow herself. She explained that many conservative families see widows as a liability.

While losing a spouse can be destabilizing, it has been dangerous for thousands of Indian women who have lost their husbands to COVID-19. Without financial planning, husbands left wives vulnerable to a patriarchal society that stigmatizes widows and refuses them their rightful inheritance. Destitute and isolated, COVID widows are often subjected to awful acts of physical and sexual violence, sometimes at the hands of their own family members. As the death toll from India's second wave unfolds, inevitable consecutive waves threaten to ruin the lives of more women who will suffer their own consequences due to social inequality.

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic reversed the limited progress that has been made on gender equality and women’s rights. The coronavirus outbreak exacerbated existing inequalities for women and girls across every sphere – from health and the economy, to security and social protection.

Recommendations from the study are: Government of India should immediately focus on gathering data and mapping of widows to COVID so that it helps to develop policies and schemes. A Pilot study on different aspects of widowhood, both medical and non-medical is a much needed intervention, so that it will assess the impact of the disease and its socio-economic causes. Economic development for COVID widows is to be designed in convergence with women SHGs program. Safety and protection of widows and their children is to be taken care of in convergence with various government departments and CSOs. Effective timely measures are to be initiated with legal aid, to uphold property rights of widows. Priority to be given to widows in the government housing schemes and other social protective schemes. Mental health programmes are to be connected and cover COVID widows with additional inputs by designing strategies, that will be helpful for the wellbeing and productivity in the long run. The government, along with civil society organizations, must take the lead in recognizing that for inclusive, equitable, and sustainable growth and long-term recovery from the pandemic, rural women’s asset strength and fallback positions must be made stronger.

Key Objectives of the report

- (1) To document the current challenges of the COVID widows
- (2) To bring out recommendations and suggest measures for developing policies for the development and empowerment of COVID widows.

INTRODUCTION

Widow is a woman who has lost her spouse. “Widowhood is a situation of social demise of the husband,” says Mohini Giri, a veteran activist in the fight for Women’s rights and a widow herself. She asserts that many conservative families see widows as a liability. The ordinary term for a widow in India is “vidhwa” which originates from the Sanskrit word “vidh” which means “to be destitute”. There are around 55 million widows in India that is equal to the entire population of South Africa and Tanzania. There is no sole concept with respect to widowhood; it is subjected to diverse experiences, varied interpersonal and social implications and various changes in the life of women across varying cultural settings.

Losing a spouse is one of the most traumatic experiences in an individual’s life. And to be a woman who has lost her husband, especially during COVID times is even more daunting owing to the social and physical distancing guidelines. Many women have felt that they have had no closure as they have not been able to see or visit their husbands towards the end in hospitals or be able to carry out a dignified funeral with loved ones or family.

While losing a spouse can be destabilizing, it has been unsafe/perilous/terrifying for thousands of Indian women who have lost their husbands to COVID-19. Without a financial plan, Rani’s (name changed) husband left her vulnerable to a patriarchal society that stigmatizes widows and refuses them their rightful inheritance. Destitute and isolated, COVID widows, like Rani, are often subjected to acts of physical and sexual violence, sometimes by their own family members. As the death toll from India’s second wave unfolds, an inevitable consecutive wave threatens to ruin the lives of more women who will suffer consequences, beyond the already devastating loss of their loved ones.

Meera Khanna, an activist said “I have witnessed these human rights violations firsthand. Despite some protections for widows under Indian law, cultural norms still allow such discrimination and violence to occur throughout the country. The Supreme Court of India in 2017 accepted recommendations from the expert committee on widows, but many lack the resources and knowledge to fight for their rights. Impoverished widows may be forced into marriages with their late husband’s male relatives, as if they were inherited property. Some lose their children without understanding how to navigate the courts to fight for custody. With more than 32 million COVID-19 cases 438,000 deaths so far in India, the tragedy for Indian women continues to grow”

India is not the only country where violence against widows is a problem. In neighboring Nepal, the remarriage of a widowed woman is a taboo. Accordingly, these single women are left behind, cut off from family—both emotionally and financially—at the time of their husband’s death.

According to UN Women, 1 in 10 widows around the world lives in extreme poverty.

Societal discrimination and exploitation relegate these vulnerable women and girls to a life of economic insecurity. Behavioral codes in some cultures restrict a widow’s mobility, barring her from access to job training or the ability to find work. Children of widows, and child widows of forced marriages, are withdrawn from school, leaving them at risk of abuse and feeding the intergenerational cycle of poverty and sexual violence.

For many women around the world, the devastating loss of a partner is magnified by a long-term fight for their basic rights and dignity. Even though there are more than 258 million widows around the world, widows have historically been left unseen, unsupported, and unmeasured in our societies.

Currently, as armed conflicts, displacement and migration, and the COVID-19 pandemic leave tens of thousands of women newly widowed and many others whose partners are missing or disappeared. The unique experiences and needs of widows must be brought to the forefront, with their voices leading the way. **23rd June is observed as International Widows' Day** to take a look at some of the issues affecting widows around the world and what must be done to safeguard and advance their rights.

According to a 2015 survey by ratings agency Standard and Poor's (S&P), 35 per cent of men across the globe are financially literate compared to 30 per cent of women, BBC reported. But in India, financial literacy is lower and the gender gap is wider, with 27 per cent of men financially literate compared to just 20 per cent of women.

COVID-IT'S IMPACT ON WOMEN

Sustainable Development Goal 5: Gender equality

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic reversed the limited progress that has been made on gender equality and women's rights. The coronavirus outbreak exacerbated existing inequalities for women and girls across every sphere – from health and the economy, to security and social protection. Let's focus on our commitment to Goal 5 for 2030.

Furthermore, Governments should take action to uphold their commitments to ensure the rights of widows as enshrined in international law, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Even when national laws exist to protect the rights of widows, weaknesses in the judicial systems of many States compromise how widows' rights are defended in practice and should be addressed. Lack of awareness and discrimination by judicial officials can cause widows to avoid turning to the justice system to seek reparations.

Programmes and policies for ending violence against widows and their children, poverty alleviation, education, and other support to widows of all ages need to be undertaken, including in the context of action plans to accelerate achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

And in the context of COVID-19, widows must not be left out of our work to “build back better.” Let us ensure that our recovery prioritizes their unique needs and supports societies to be more inclusive, resilient, and equal for all.

The still unfolding COVID-19 pandemic exacted a heavy toll in rural India during the second wave. It led to more deaths than the first wave, and rural fatalities were disproportionately higher among men compared to women. In a study conducted showed that rural Gujarat, there is 22 percent increase in fatalities at the peak of the second wave, even as a report by The Wire mentioned to undercounting of deaths by up to 27 times.

Despite the lack of an official record, it is clear that the pandemic has left thousands of women newly widowed. Many have lost the sole breadwinner of their families and are struggling to manage the double burden of grief and making a living. In the Indian context this is a matter of grave concern as single women are stigmatised, excluded, and marginalised by the community and government policies alike. The social impacts of an increasing number of single women aside, the COVID-19-led crisis is also aggravating the ‘feminisation of agriculture’ in rural India. This is interpreted as an increase in women being included in the unpaid agriculture labour force (working on their own land) under adverse conditions without decision-making power, owing to disparity in land ownership.

While there is a lack of gender-differentiated data on land ownership, the agricultural census provides information in the form of operational holdings along with some information on its social composition. In India, only 12.8 percent of land holdings are under the ownership of women, covering a land area of 10.3 percent. A study undertaken in Gujarat reveals why women who have been widowed during COVID-19 are struggling to access their land rights. In the state of Gujarat, this is only marginally higher, women own 14.1 percent of land holdings and have 13.2 percent share in land area.

Despite legal and policy recognition, women's land rights are deeply enmeshed in discriminatory sociocultural norms and patriarchal customary practices. In the absence of a concerted effort by the state to address gender inequality, there is a wide gap between the enabling legal framework and the actual extent to which such rights are exercised. Men and boys are undisputed heirs to land whereas women's claim over right to land is almost always questioned and met with opposition and, often, violence.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, SWATI, an organisation, has undertaken a study in Gujarat between March 15th to May 15, 2021 in 40 villages, to understand the gender impact of the pandemic on women and girls—the impact of COVID-19 on women's land rights is a major area of inquiry. Land is an important resource in rural areas and land-based livelihoods contribute to 70 percent of rural livelihoods. With over 85 percent rural women engaged in agriculture, has understood the impact on access to land or inheritance for women who had lost their husbands, fathers, fathers-in-law, and other male landowning members. 473 deaths due to COVID-19 or suspected COVID-19 were reported during this period, of which 63 percent were men and 27 percent were women. The findings of the study reveal that during focused group discussions women revealed the specific challenges that they face in accessing their land rights, which are dependent on the woman's relation with the male landholding and decision-taking member of the family, her age, whether she has children, if her children are girls, and various other subjective factors. Women's land rights continue to be mediated through their relationship with men. With the death of male members come many social sanctions and restrictions that disadvantage women.

There is a wide gap between the enabling legal framework and the actual extent to which women's land rights are exercised. The government, along with civil society organisations, must take the lead in recognizing that for inclusive, equitable, and sustainable growth and long-term recovery from the pandemic, women's asset strength and fallback positions must be made stronger. This can be done by:

- Ensuring implementation of existing gender equitable land, agricultural policies and working to mitigate the contradictions posed by customary practices and the formal legal system
- Reviewing and subsidizing the input cost for small and marginal holdings and ensuring minimum support price
- Affirmative actions and policies to promote women's tenurial security, access to inputs and credit, drudgery reducing tools, and facilitating women's access to markets

SCENARIO OF WIDOWS

Global

For many women around the world, the devastating loss of a partner is magnified by a long-term fight for their basic rights and dignity. Despite the fact that there are millions of widows around the world, widows have historically been left unseen, unsupported, and unmeasured in our societies.

National

Laws made for the protection of Widow's Rights in India

Hindu Widow's Remarriage Act 1956:

Under the East India Company rule, this act was enacted on 26 July 1856

- There are an estimated 258 million widows around the world, and nearly one in ten live in extreme poverty.
- In some parts of eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, for instance, it is reported that around 50 per cent of women are widows.
- Widows are coerced into participating in harmful, degrading and even life-threatening traditional practices as part of burial and mourning rites.

- It is estimated there are 40 million widows in India today – 10 per cent of the country's female population.
- India has had more than 30 million COVID-19 cases and 411,000 deaths. More than 200,000 of those deaths took place during the second wave alone, which began in April with a peak in May 2021.
- There is no data on the number of COVID widows in India.

which legalized remarriage of Hindu widows in all jurisdictions. It was the first important social reform law after the abolition of Sati by Lord William Bentinck due to which widows are entitled to remarry on their choice.

Property rights of the Widows:

Earlier, widows who decided to remarry were forbidden by the law from inheriting their deceased husband's property. As stated under the provisions of the Hindu Succession Act, 1956, widows who choose to remarry still have a right on their deceased husband's property. They are grouped under Class –I heirs of their deceased husbands and shall have the right to inherit. However, the Hindu Succession Act also prescribes those certain widows who cannot succeed or inherit. "Certain widows remarrying may not inherit as widows. Any heir, who is related to an intestate as the widow of a pre-deceased son or the widow of a brother shall not be entitled to succeed to the property of the intestate as such widow, if on the date the succession opens, she has re-married."

INITIATIVES IN INDIA FOR COVID WIDOWS

Some initiatives were launched to provide timely relief and rehabilitation to COVID widows and their children. Government of India and states had taken measures relating to health such as medical care; follow up of each COVID positive case, vaccination drives, and frontline workers follow up on connecting to social security schemes. Hence the initiatives other than health are taken into consideration to address dignity for widows.

Training and employment opportunities

The **IC3 Institute**, a U.S. non-profit organisation, is helping Indian women who have lost their spouses to COVID-19 by empowering them with training and employment opportunities. These women will be trained as career counselors and connected with full-time employment opportunities within IC3's global network of high schools. Ganesh Kohli, founder of the IC3 Movement says, "The COVID-19 surge in India has brought many challenges, one of which is the loss of the sole breadwinners in many families, pushing them to the brink of poverty. While there has been a lot of international and domestic support for immediate relief measures, as the pandemic wears on, these families need sustenance support beyond having their immediate relief needs met. Our hope is that providing sustainable livelihood opportunities to the affected families will help them overcome the many challenges of the post-pandemic world."

Medical, livelihood and education-related needs of those affected by the pandemic

Working on the ground in several districts of the country, **ActionAid Association**, another organisation helping COVID widows has been focusing on the medical, livelihood and education-related needs of those affected by the pandemic. The organisation has been making efforts for the rehabilitation of families left behind due to the death of income providers. Given many unrecorded deaths and the inability of families to prove death from COVID-19, the numbers of COVID widows are likely to be higher than just those reported, creating added vulnerabilities for them. Sandeep Chachra, Executive Director of ActionAid Association says, "COVID widows are often being left out of rehabilitative efforts and announced entitlements on account of lack of information, awareness or inability to do the required paperwork. After the second wave, for instance, in Navsari, Gujarat, ActionAid conducted a survey aimed towards identifying the women widowed during the pandemic; they are now initiating a targeted plan for their welfare." Single women have, in general, been at the centre of ActionAid Association's wide-ranging work, including relief efforts during the pandemic. In several states, during relief distribution (rations and hygiene kits); medical support and psycho-social counseling; and livelihood interventions, ActionAid has prioritized such women, numbering into thousands.

Mission Vatsalya

To extend help to women who lost their husbands due to pandemic, the Maharashtra government's Women and Child Development Department has launched '**Mission Vatsalya**,' aimed to serve around 18 benefits, schemes, services to them under one roof. "COVID widows, especially from rural areas, underprivileged backgrounds and deprived sections were a neglected facet of the crisis. Due to the death of the breadwinner, their hardship aggravated. Considering these aspects, Mission Vatsalya is launched," said Women and Child Development Minister. In the last one and half years, around 15,095 women lost their husbands due to COVID-19. Of them, 14,661 women were listed by the District Task Force. Ms. Thakur said efforts are being made by the department to provide 18 services to help them and also to get the certificates they need including a number of schemes like Sanjay Gandhi Niradhar Yojana and Gharkul Yojana.

Counselling, Skilling, and livelihoods

Vasavya Mahila Mandali(VMM) has supported widows in providing relief and rehabilitation and education support to children in Andhra Pradesh. VMM has provided skilling for widows in tailoring and fashion designing, embroidery and supported them with

sewing machines. VMM has connected them to women entrepreneurs to provide job work. VMM has offered counseling to COVID widows and their children, to come out of grief and pain by building 'Hope' in life. UNWOMEN USA LA chapter in partnership with VMM has conducted a virtual event on 12th August 2021 on India's COVID widows – a humanitarian crisis. In this event the voices of COVID widows were heard. This was produced by VMM and UNWOMEN USA LA chapter and the Key Speakers and CSOs shared their experiences on working with COVID widows. https://fb.watch/e7xJeUS_E0/

VMM and UNICEF team visit to villages:

On 9th April 2022, VMM team along with UNICEF District Coordinator visited Kummari Kuntla village in NTR district, which has 394 Families (as per Ration cards). In this village, VMM has identified 3 COVID widows and interacted with them. Krishna (Name changed), 30 lost her husband aged 35 in 2nd COVID wave on 30th May 2021. Her husband was an auto driver. She has 2 children, a son and a daughter. She said that till now, she didn't get any support from government, although government announced some incentives/schemes. She added that she approached village volunteers working with Village Secretariat, he responded her that for only if death occurred in government hospitals, the scheme is applicable, but not for death at house. She told, her husband got fever, tested for COVID and found positive. He had approached the local doctor and followed medication prescribed and was under home quarantine. But, as days passed, his condition deteriorated. Then her family planned to shift him to a government hospital. But, there was no availability of an ambulance or three wheller. Finally, they got a three-wheeler and started to the hospital, but unfortunately, he died on the way to hospital. It was a shock for Krishna. Now she is a daily wage earner and started a small shop in her house. She is very bold, and never dependent on anyone. She decided to give good education to her children. She is getting widow pension INR 2500 rupees per month under social security scheme.

PM CARES scheme for children who lost parents to COVID

The **PM CARES** for Children Scheme was launched by The Hon'ble Prime Minister of India on 29th May 2021 for the Children. It aims to support children who have lost both the Parents or legal Guardian or Adoptive Parents or Surviving Parent to COVID-19 pandemic during the period starting from 11th March 2020. The objective of the Scheme is to ensure comprehensive care and protection of Children in a sustained manner, and enable their wellbeing through health insurance, empower them through education and equip them for self-sufficient existence with financial support on reaching 23 years of age. Under this initiative from the state of Andhra Pradesh 511 applications were received and approved are 351 (accessed website on 8th July 2022. <https://pmcaresforchildren.in/>)

STORIES FROM THE HEARTS...

Families stigmatizing widows

“I, Parvathi, 40, studied up to 5th class, born and brought up in Ramalingeswarnagar, a relocated slum in Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh. Parents are daily wage earners, and my family is below poverty line. I was married 20 years ago with Venkateswara Rao, an auto driver. I have two children: son (17) and daughter (15) and studying 11th and 10th standard respectively. I am a home maker and do not possess skills to earn. I never went out even to get provisions and my husband used to attend to all the tasks. In April 2021, my husband got COVID, and he was in home care under the supervision of frontline health care workers.

Even to admit him in hospital for better care and monitoring, I did not have money. After few days my husband suffered with sever breathing problem and that led to his death after two weeks of sickness. Life became so confusing to lead by staying in a rented house, to get food, at least two meals a day and investing on education of children. My family was completely runing on the earnings of my husband as an auto driver. As my husband's cousin is a Peer educator in trucker's project of Vasavya Mahila Mandali, Vijayawada, the outreach workers came to my house and witnessed my situation. The team has given me lot of HOPE to continue life and suggested to have a vegetable shop. I visited Vasavya Mahila Mandali, received consistent counseling, guidance and provided me with a financial support of INR 15000 under HCL Foundation Uday initiative of Amma project. Now, I am managing vegetable vending shop in front of my house. Adding to it, I am making pickles and getting additional income which is helping me lead the family hassle-free. I applied for widow pension in February 2022 but did not receive any communication. For my children's education, I applied to PM Cares and am waiting for their support.”

Defensive attitude of In-laws make widow's life miserable

“I am Anasuya, 35 years, studied up to Intermediate (12th standard). I was brought up in Pamarru in Krishna district and hailed from an agriculture family. I have one elder sister, married. I was married to Sivarama Krishna on 12th May 2013 and moved to Ramalingeswarnagar slum in Vijayawada. My husband worked in a hotel as electrician and his salary is INR 15000 per month. I am working in SITI cable channel with a monthly salary is INR 6000. My stepmother-in-law was always abusive and shaming me for not bearing children but had 3 miscarriages. Me and my husband stayed in one portion in my father-in-law's house and paid rent for it. My husband tested COVID positive in end of April 2021, was hospitalized and died on 15th May 2021. For my husband's medical expenses, I invested about INR two lakhs, but could not save him. We both had an affectionate bonding and I miss him so much. After my husband's death I faced a lot of challenges: stigmatized as a widow and asked to leave the house; brother-in-law took away aadhar and household ration cards saying he will help me in processing the amounts which I am eligible as nominee from Life Insurance Corporation and others too. But, when I asked about the two LIC policies, the nominee was my father-in-law, so I did not get any benefit. My In-laws said that I won't get property as I did not have children and forced me to leave the house and get remarried. With the help of my parents I came to know that the insurance money was already paid to my father-in-law. I was devastated and shared to one of my friends in neighborhood and she suggested to visit the family counseling center of Vasavya Mahila Mandali. Hence, I met the management and counseling team and Mahila Mitra community volunteers. With VMM's guidance, I lodged a complaint in the police station with regard to the harassment from in laws with abusive remarks and threatening me to vacate house forcibly and that I lost the right of my husband's property.

The police suggested to have counseling with my in-laws family, discussed on the share of my property with one time settlement and finally at Vasavya Mahila Mandali after completing all the legal paperwork, I got INR seven lakhs. After this arbitration, I vacated the house and moved to my parental family. The process took three months, which has taken away my energies through stress and abuse, and shame in addition to the cultural norms of discrimination. It is almost after 10 months of the demise of my husband, from March 2022, I covered under the social security scheme of widow pension of INR 2500 per month. Secondly, about my insurance from government, when the ward volunteer enquired at my in laws house, they said that they have no more relationship with me and did not even give my parental family address. Due to that I lost getting some privileges from government too.”

Delayed response to provide widow pension

“I am Sk Parveen, 29, resident of Nainavaram, Vijayawada rural Mandal, NTR district have three children: 9, 7 and 2 years. My husband was a tailor and managed a boutique, had expertise in his profession. I have skills in stitching of blouses, so I too worked in our boutique. During COVID second wave, on May 5th, 2021, I lost my husband Abdul Khadar Jilani to COVID-19. My husband was the breadwinner of the family. I faced a lot of financial crisis and lost his business and furniture, as I could not manage the boutique. None of the relatives supported me and my children and faced stigma from villagers and was ostracized socially as a widow. Now, I am managing my family by living in my own house, my mother-in-law supporting INR 2750 for my baby’s milk, as she receives widow pension from government. I applied for widow pension and ration card. Till June 2022, I did not receive any response from the government, even after 13 months of my husband’s death. The community Coordinator from Vasavya Mahila Mandali visited my house and facilitated me in applying for government schemes but I am still waiting. As I know tailoring, Vasavya Mahila Mandali provided me with the financial support from HSBC under SEE4SHE project and provided a commercial sewing machine. That is the only support I got after becoming a widow and this is providing me livelihood by stitching blouses and managing family of five that is me with 3 children and mother-in-law. The consistent counseling and guidance of VMM is making my family to have three meal a day. The only support I received from the Collector, Krishna district with VMM facilitation, is 25 kilos of rice bag and INR 1000. The immediate response of the Collector has given me meals to my family for few days and provided medical aid to my son suffering with typhoid. I am still waiting to get my ration card and widow pension. As a single woman approaching any one for support is not that easy, with a fear of abuse and shaming. Treat widows as human beings.”

Reserves Spent for Medical and family maintenance

I, Jaheeda, 28 is living in RR Peta, a relocated slum in Vijayawada in a rented house. I studied up to 10th standard. I was married to Sk. Nagur in 2016. I have two sons, four and two years old. Eldest son is going to anganwadi center near to my house. We both are engaged in doing vegetable vending through mobile cart. My husband was affected with COVID in April 2021 and died on 17th May 2021. My parents were from Pedana village and after two years of my marriage both parents died. I have one brother staying in Pedana. My in laws family is not in touch with me after demise of my husband. I spent the earnings on vegetable vending for the medical expenses of my husband, who was in home care and due to lockdown, the income also decreased. So, I spent the reserves for family maintenance. Through an anganwadi teacher, I approached Vasavya Mahila Mandali. There, I got a relief to take my occupation of vegetable vending forward with consistent counseling and guidance. I received the financial support of INR 15000 with which I am back to work and selling vegetables and managing my home and children, with the daily income of about INR 200. As my second son is still young, I keep him along with me while doing vending, as there is no one to care for children. I want to tell “I became an untouchable for everybody and had none to hear to my agonies or feelings. I cried a lot in silence. It was a terrible situation to balance taking care of children and micro business.” I am covered under social security scheme of widow pension and getting monthly INR 2500 from January 2022, after seven months of my husband’s demise.”

Worried about my daughters’ continuation of education

I, Sk Javeria Samrin, 38 studied up to 8th class from Chennai. I met my husband Sk Tajuddin during his work as driver on trucks and married inter religious and converted to Muslim. My parents did not give consent for marriage, but with my willingness I came out of the house

and moved to Vombay colony, Vijayawada and got married and continued to stay with my husband. I am blessed with two daughters 18 and 19 years and both are in Engineering graduation (first and second year). As my husband’s income as lorry driver was INR 30000 to 40000 per month and we had a comfortable life. His earnings are the only income for my family. I suddenly came to know that my husband got COVID and he died on May 8th 2021. I spent six lakhs of rupees for his treatment, which I borrowed from a money lender. I am unable to pay my debts and my parents too died long back. I am left with no support system. My in-laws too are unable to support me. I approached Vasavya Mahila Mandali for financial support for continuing the education of my two daughters. VMM team told that immediately they do not have such program and if any such opportunity comes, they will inform. I am concerned about my daughters’ education. I am not even getting widow pension under social security scheme.”

MAPPING OF COVID WIDOWS IN NTR DISTRICT, ANDHRA PRADESH- AN ANALYSIS

The Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) Women Development department, NTR district of Andhra Pradesh collected information for March 2020 to May 2022 a total of 27 months with three COVID waves along with three lockdowns.

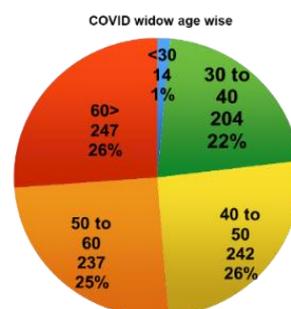
During this period, 14731 (both male and female) died due to COVID in **Andhra Pradesh**. As the study is focused on COVID widows, the male who died of COVID is taken as part of the data to study.

Table 2: Age group of COVID widows in NTR District

Age groups					
<30	30 to 40	40 to 50	50 to 60	60>	Total
14	204	242	237	247	944
1.48%	21.61%	25.64%	25.11%	26.17%	100%

While in NTR district male died due to COVID were 944 (6%) among them, men aged below 30 years were 14 (1.48%), 30 to 40 years 204 (21.61%), 40 to 50 years 242 (25.64%); 50 to 60 years 237 (25.11%) and above 60 years 247 (26.17%).The above data shows that 73.83% (697 of 944) were below the age of 60 years, while above 60 years were 26.17% (247 of 944).

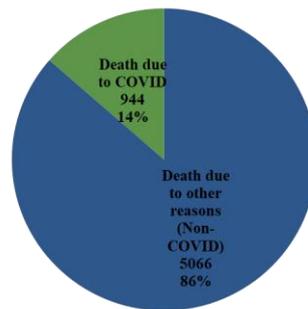
Figure 3: COVID Widows age groups



In NTR District there are 944 COVID widows that are of different age groups. The above diagram clearly shows that majority of the widows are in the age group of 30 to 50 years which constitutes 48%. In our field outreach it is observed that most of these widows have

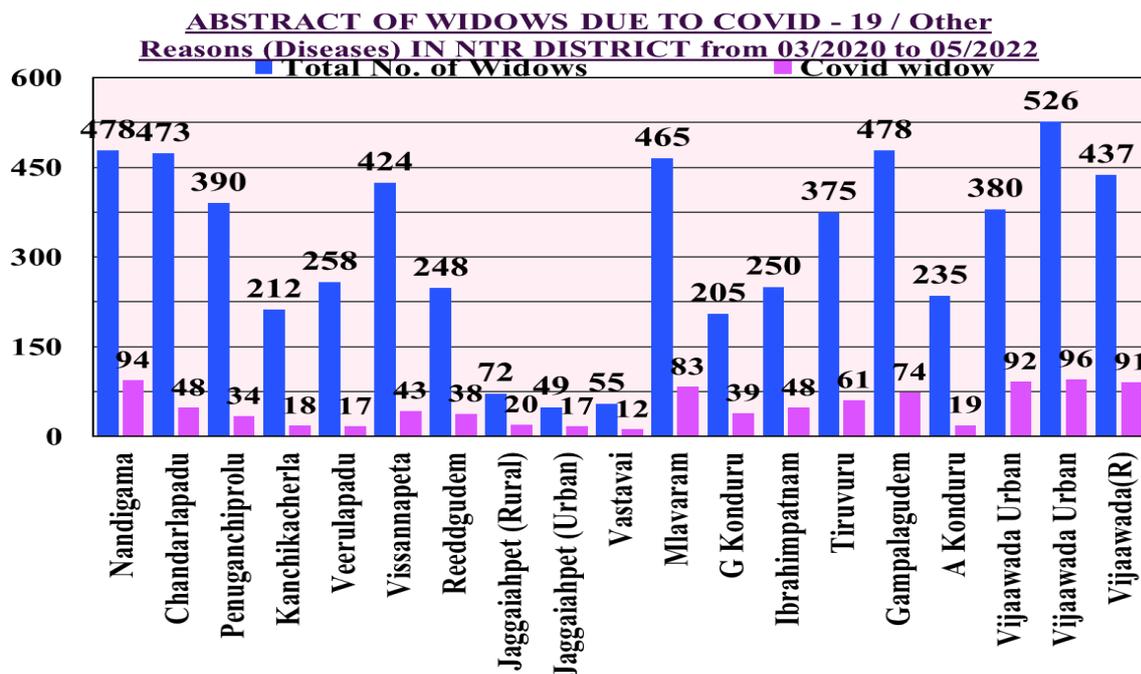
children either studying in schools or in colleges. So, support for completing their education is one of the major challenges for these widows. As these children are not yet employed, the widows do not have income for family or to meet educational needs of their children. When the husband was alive on his earnings, they met the education support but after the demise of the husband, a big vacuum is created in the family to fill it. In 50 to 60 years age group there are 25% widows, who are in menopause and have mild to moderate health issues due to hormonal imbalances, thyroid, hypertensive. Their children completed education and are placed in jobs. 26% widows are above 60 years age and they have the issues related to their shelter, food and clothing besides health.

Figure 4: Male died of COVID and other than COVID



The data from NTR district of Andhra Pradesh shows that 16% (944 of 6010) deaths have occurred due to COVID from March 2020 to May 2022 (about 27 months). The deaths occurring other than COVID were 5066; among them 39% (1996 of 5066) were due to heart attacks/cardiac related, 22% (1130 of 5066) were ageing, 6% (302 of 5066) were due to kidney problems; 4% (180 of 5066) due to lung /TB disease. 2% (91 of 5066) were due to diabetes; 3% (171 of 5066) were due to suicides and 4% (188 of 5066) due to paralysis. 1196 deaths details include (HIV, Stomach, Snakebite, fits, Brain strokes)

Figure 5: Mandal wise comparative data of COVID widows Vs other widows.



The data is based on ICDS project in NTR district, there are 19 ICDS projects which operate anganwadi centers in the locality. Vijayawada urban has two projects which shows that 906 men died during the specific period, among them 188, which is about 21% died of COVID. In rural areas, Vatsavai has about 12 COVID widows followed by Veerullapdu 17, Kanchikacherla 18, A Konduru tribal area 19 & Jaggaiahpet rural 20, whereas Nandigama 94.

Limitations of the data showing are:

1. The post COVID sequel has not recorded as cause of death in cardiac and neurological diseases categories.
2. Causative factors of suicide are not visible.
3. Among ageing the actual cause of death is not reflected as ageing is not a disease.

Challenges for women and children

As widows move through their own experiences of grief, loss, or trauma after the death of a spouse, they also face economic insecurity, discrimination, stigmatization, and harmful traditional practices on the basis of their marital status.

Social

Widows are subjected to stereotypes, prejudices, and harmful traditional practices with severe consequences. They face restrictions on their dressing, diet, and mobility for years after the death of a partner. As widow is seen as ‘not good omen’, she is ostracized socially. A COVID widow said that my mother-in-law instructed me ‘do not come out of the house early in the morning as your brother-in-laws and other family members will not have a good day if they see your face’. Even in 2022, the widows are stigmatized and discriminated, hence it pinches their heart and children to face difficulty in day-to-day life and it scars the children.

Family members and in laws became unsupportive and not willing to step up for even to hear their agonies and feelings. Children feel that they are ignored and neglected.

In some contexts, widows do perceive as “carriers” of disease and forced out of social structures entirely or subjected to “ritual cleansing” practices involving forced sex or bodily scarring that can have life-threatening health consequences.

Sometimes widows are forcibly “passed on” to or “inherited” by a new designated partner, such as the brother or other relative of her deceased spouse, denying her rights, safety, bodily autonomy, justice, and dignity in life.

Some widows are facing sexual abuse and violence from the nearby male family members and in some situations, if the widow informs her mother-in-law, she too is not supporting the injustice happening to her. Safety and protection of widows is a threat to her progress as she fights life alone.

To continue to stay in the rented house is at the mercy of the owner owing to stigma to a widow, whether the widow can pay house rent regularly as she is not earning. Many of these widows are staying in rented houses, so it is a concern of having a safe shelter to stay with her children.

Economic

During the COVID period, due to continuous lockdown and unprecedented announcements, fear of disease, social distancing and health factors contributed to the uncertainty of life. Especially the poor and middle class had suffered as there was no income and spent reserves, no financial balances, invested on health as priority and even borrowed money with their

small businesses closed. This led to more vulnerability when the bread winner of the family died. Most of the women are home makers and low literate and less skillful.

As women do not own properties on their name, hence they are unable to get credit through financial institutions. Even if someone expresses to be as a guarantor to single women, they expect personal benefits such as sexual pleasure, accept to live-in relations, and face sexual advances and demands. These threaten widows to step further to initiate into business or entrepreneurial occupations.

Health- Physical and Mental

Since 2020, many families besides their husbands, wife (current widow) and their children too were affected with COVID. So, taking care and supporting each other became mutual. The physical health of widows and their children was affected with post COVID sequelae such as breathing problems, lung and kidney disorders, hypertension, diabetic, depression and suicidal tendencies etc.

Due to the sudden change in family dynamics most of the widows were stressful and confused on how to face the life situation. There were no programmes in place to provide for the wellbeing of widows and their children which was an immediate need. Otherwise, in the long run, it would affect their productivity and basic living besides health issues.

In extreme cases, people may suffer from depression characterized by low mood, tiredness, pessimism, poor sleep and appetite, feeling helpless, guilty and hopeless with a gradual reduction in work output. Older people are more vulnerable, and special care must be taken for them.

Legal

In India, although widows do have equal inheritance rights, and they are stripped of their land, evicted from their home, or even separated from their children. They are denied access to inheritance, bank accounts, and credit, which have significant financial impacts for them, their children, and future generations.

Women are not aware of their legal rights, and it includes widows too. Ignorance of law is an opportunity for in laws and other family members to cheat her by not giving proper share in property. Secondly, widows are not even voicing about the injustice happening to them and keep themselves silent. Thirdly, if they know about the laws, they do not have financial resources to invest in fighting for justice. Fourthly, the widows are unaware of Legal Services Authority as service providers of legal aid and guidance.

Sometimes women find that grief counselling makes it easier to work through the sorrow. Regular talk therapy and counselling sessions with a grief counsellor, psychologist or therapist can help women learn to accept the loss and, in time, start a new life. There are also support groups where grieving women can share and help each other with suggestions or thoughts to manage their emotions and feelings. It is suggested, "Looking after oneself is of primal importance. Women are asked to direct their thoughts and energies towards their families and children. Resting with good sleep, eating well, exercising and keeping oneself mentally and constructively occupied is very important. Accepting family or loved one's company, companionship or help is also healthy."

For those with children, remember that they are grieving, too. Open and honest communication where bereavement is normalized is important. It's okay to break down, be vulnerable or cry in front of their children or loved ones. Its to add, "Mourning takes time and

is a very individualistic journey. Sometimes medication may also help to alleviate the anxiety, negative thoughts, low moods and disturbed sleep.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. As there is no data available about COVID widows, Government of India should immediately focus on gathering data and mapping, so that it helps to develop policies and schemes.
2. Specific areas are to be taken for the pilot study on different aspects of widowhood, both medical and non-medical, so that it will assess the impact of the disease and its socio-economic causes.
3. Economic development for COVID widows is to be designed in convergence with women SHGs program.
4. Safety and protection of widows and their children is to be taken care of in convergence with various government departments and CSOs.
5. Effective timely measures are to be initiated with legal aid, to uphold property rights of widows.
6. Priority to be given to widows in the government housing schemes, so that the major challenge of house rent will have permanent solution.
7. Mental health programmes to be connected and cover COVID widows with additional inputs by designing strategies, that will be helpful for the wellbeing and productivity in the long run.
8. The government, along with civil society organisations, must take the lead in recognizing that for inclusive, equitable, and sustainable growth and long-term recovery from the pandemic, rural women’s asset strength and fallback positions must be made stronger
9. As PM Cares education scheme for child orphans is already in place, it needs to have more awareness so the widow or her grown up children can access to apply and bring visibility through social media to make it more popularized and Nationwide academic institutions
10. About land rights for women, undertaking mass campaigns to increase women’s literacy about their land rights and addressing discriminatory practices and set up time-bound, gender-sensitive, and single-window clearance mechanisms for women to seek guidance, legal and administrative services for their land claims is to be done.

Widows’ voices and experiences must be centred in the movements and policies that impact their lives. From local campaigns to international action, it is imperative that widows speak and make decisions about their own situations and needs.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, tens of thousands of women have been widowed by the virus and may be grieving, while cut off from their usual socio-economic and family supports. As nations continue to fight the virus on the front lines or begin recovery efforts, widows must not be left out of economic stimulus and social assistance programmes, or as decision-makers and beneficiaries of plans to “build back better”.

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VASAVYA MAHILA MANDALI

 D.No. 40-9/1-16, Vasavya Nagar, Benz Circle,
Vijayawada - 520 010. Andhra Pradesh, India.

 +91 866 2470966

 vasavyamm@vasavya.org

 www.vasavya.org