



INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES AND INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES

(Peer-reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access Journal)

DOI : 03.2021-11278686

ISSN : 2582-8568

IMPACT FACTOR : 5.71 (SJIF 2021)

FAMILY AND DESERTED WOMEN: GROUND LEVEL REALITIES IN MAHARASHTRA

Dr. (Mrs) Usha Patil

Associate Professor & Head,
Department of Sociology,
Mahavir Mahavidyalaya, Kolhapur

DOI No. **03.2021-11278686** DOI Link :: <http://doi-ds.org/doi/10.2021-42911648/IRJHIS2105011>

Abstract:

A deserted woman is the one whom husband has denied the marital co-existence. The husband deserts her even when she has not committed any serious offence. Cast-away women or parityakta in Marathi are the other terms used for these women. The number of such women is large in urban and rural areas in Maharashtra.

A brief review of the studies conducted at the Government, NGO and individual levels on the issue of deserted women in Maharashtra will be taken.

A study was conducted by the second author in 2001 in Kolhapur, Sangli and Satara districts in Southern Maharashtra. There were 709 deserted women in the district headquarters and 26,033 deserted women in villages in these three districts. The study covers 71 deserted women from urban areas and 121 deserted women from rural areas from three districts. The focus will be on the both household settings, marital relations, social life and participation in movements. Some case-studies will also be presented. Thus the ground level realities of deserted women in Maharashtra will be presented.

Keywords: *Deserted woman, Alcoholism, Dowry, Child Marriage*

1. Introduction:

A deserted woman is the one whom husband has denied the marital co-existence. The husband deserts her even when she has not committed any serious offence. Cast-away women or parityakta in Marathi are the other terms used for these women. In India, the patriarchal form of society and the secondary status attributed to women means that the deserted person is always the wife. We very rarely hear about the husband being deserted and in case of desertion he is able to get another wife. In Indian society, the status of a man does not bear any relation to his marital status, that is, whether he is a bachelor, married, a divorced or a widower. On the other hand, the esteem in

which a woman is held is influenced strongly by her marital status. A woman who is unmarried, divorced, widower or deserted is looked down upon. In this context, the plight of the deserted women is even worse than a widow. While a widow may elicit some sympathy, all that a deserted woman is assured of is contempt.

As industrialization is advancing, the joint family system is disintegrating in urban areas. In the rural areas too, pauperization has forced people to look for daily wages, accelerating the nuclear family phenomenon. With shortage of space in cities and increasing fragmentation of land holding through the breaking up of joint families in the rural areas, it has become very difficult for one man to feed more than one wife. Thus, over the years, the number of women deserted and forced out of the family has increased. The present paper has focused on the ground level realities of deserted women in Maharashtra.

2. Social Disorganization Perspective:

The central part of social organization is the notion of social rules. The rules provide coordination between the various parts of the society and regulate the behaviour of individuals. With the concepts of social organization and social rules, Sociology now had its own distinctively sociological subject matter, its own concepts and its own way of depicting reality.

As time went on, sociologists began to conceptualize three different types of social disorganization. First is the concept of normlessness. When there are no clear rules to govern a situation, it is said to be in a state of normlessness. A second type of social disorganization is called culture conflict. In culture conflict, there are plenty of rules to follow, but the rules are mutually contradictory. Thus, conformity to one set of rules automatically means violating another set. A third type of social disorganization is called breakdown. In this case, conformity to the rules fails to bring the expected rewards of proves punishing instead; thus, the rules break down and become ineffective. When the breakdown of rules occurs on a larger scale, the result can be a loss of coordination and effectiveness by whole organizations or governments.

The social disorganization approach is the most appropriate approach to investigate the social disorganization approach can be used to find the answers to questions such as: What is the scope and nature of the deserted women's problem? What could be the ameliorative measures against particular social problem. Social disorganization, in the broadest sense, means the weakening or crumbling down of the social system that establishes and controls the individual and social behaviour. Some of the causes that weaken or disintegrate the behaviour control system are industrialization-propelled urbanization and the processes of modernization under way in the society. As the process of social transformation gathers momentum, the traditional individual and social behaviour control mechanisms lose their effectiveness, ultimately leading to social disorganization. Conversely, it gives rise to multifarious social problems of colossal magnitude.

3. Studies on Deserted Women:

The paper will be presenting three studies conducted on deserted women in Maharashtra. Though there are many studies on this issue the focus has been done on the studies done after 2000.

4. Deserted Hindu Women in Southern Maharashtra:

The research topic for Ph.D. covers the three districts of Kolhapur, Sangli and Satara. (Patil Usha B., 2001). A study was conducted by the second author in 2001 in Kolhapur, Sangli and Satara districts in Southern Maharashtra. There were 709 deserted women in the district headquarters and 26,033 deserted women in villages in these three districts. The study covers 71 deserted women from urban areas and 121 deserted women from rural areas from three districts. The survey data was collected by administering a structured interview schedule to all the deserted women respondents during the period from November 1999 to April 2000.

4.1. Deserted Women in Parental Household Setting:

Majority of the deserted women [31 (15.7%)] hailed from economically backward nuclear families. They were never really motivated to pursue education hence, they remained illiterate or semiliterate [78 (87.5%)]. The number of deserted women whose parents owned a cultivable land was very meager [28 (14.6%)]. The parental family members of many deserted women were [69 (35.9%)] agricultural labourers themselves. Some of the deserted women's parents owned a grocery shop or were lower level employees in government or private establishments. On the whole, the economic condition of many deserted women's parental household was found to be backward. Hence, they grew up facing the numerous related problems. Many deserted women had accepted the marriage settled by their parents. Very few of them had raised their objections to the marriage settled.

It is because of the illiteracy or semi-literacy of the deserted women, coupled with their dire financial straits that their problems are enormous and they have to live a life of penury.

4.2. Deserted Women in Husband's Household Setting:

It was generally found that the deserted women's husband's household is not economically prosperous. It was mainly engaged in agriculture. Those who owned agricultural land worked in their own fields; the rest worked either as farm labourers or held sundry occupations.

The husband's parents of some deserted women had asked for a dowry, but since it was not paid, the daughter-in-law was tormented. Some other deserted women suffered at the hands of the mother-in-law, sisters-in-law or husband's brother's wife. Many [45 (23.4%)] deserted women's marital happiness was destroyed by the mother/sister-in-law by inciting the husband through lies to pick up quarrels or even beating. In many [77 (83.4%)] deserted women's case, the husband's also did not accept them fully. They were mostly ill-treated in the husband's house, their children were neglected and they were never enquired after. On the whole, these deserted women had to lead a

neglected and insulting existence in their husband's household. Since there was no one to care for them or offer them affection in the husband's house, they are living a deserted life.

4.3. Marital Relations:

It was generally found that these relations were never satisfactory. In some marriages, both the groom and the bride chose each other and got married; in some other marriages, family elders settled the marriage after obtaining a perfunctory consent of the bride and the groom; sometimes, the marriage was forced on the bride just because the groom had chosen her. However, howsoever the marriage was settled, it sustained only on the mutual trust and level between the couple; else, it broke down. In the case of deserted women, however, the spouses never got the opportunity to understand each other and the situation started to deteriorate even before the bond of affection and trust was created. Further, female members like the mother-in-law or sister-in-law in the husband's household added fuel to the fire. The spouses were not allowed to understand each other. After suffering at the hands of the in-laws, the wife did not receive sympathy or the closeness of the husband and the marital relations deteriorated.

Also, it became difficult for some women to live with the husband because of his addictions. Liquor, womanizing, suspicious nature, beating the wife at others' instigation all led to breaking down of the marital relations and the husband either threw out the wife or she left him. In either case, she had to live a deserted life of dejection.

Majority [179 (88.6%)] of the deserted women are not provided a means of livelihood by their husbands. The law has adequate provisions to seek alimony for such women. But because of its inadequacy, these women are reluctant to seek legal recourse to secure it. Some husbands are unemployed. Those who do some work are unwilling to pay the alimony. Consequently, the deserted women are forced to face monetary problems.

Majority of these women, after having been deserted by the husband, went to their parental homes where their parents offered them solace and support, out of affection and sympathy. The parents rarely consulted the son and the daughter-in-law over the issue of keeping the deserted daughter, but after their demise, both the brother and the daughter-in-law began harassing them. It was also found that some deserted women did not go to the father's place and instead, began living independently.

From the above detailed study of 'deserted women' pointed out the four important causes behind this problem: womanizer nature of husband, suspicious nature of husband wife beating and alcoholic nature of husband.

4.5 Cases under Study: Some representative cases are presented here:

Case No.1

A case was of one primary teacher, 29 years old. She was living in joint family and obviously

the agriculture was the main occupation. Their economic condition was sound. Mother-in-law was dominant in her family. Mother-in-law and husband harass her psychologically for dowry. Her husband was womanizer in nature. So husband deserted her. Now she is living with her mother along with son.

Case No.2

A case was of one helpless woman, 23 year old. Her mother-in-law was cruel in nature; she was expert in doing magic. Her father-in-law was living separately from her. Sister-in-law, Husband and mother-in-law were harassing psychologically, for dowry. Lastly they deserted her because of mother-in-law. But her maternal family supported her strongly.

Case No.3

A case was of a woman who deserted by her husband because he disliked her. Father-in-law was in favour of her but husband was not interested. Within a year he deserted her and now she is living with her parents.

Case No.4

A case was of a woman who was a victim of husband's suspicious nature. Her husband was doing masonry work. For meeting the ends she was also doing work as maidservant. But her husband was suspicious and womanizer and alcoholic in nature. Finally he deserted her. Now she is living with parental home.

Case No.5

A case was of educated and handicapped women. Her husband was working in film line. Her husband's had no income. So she was doing petty business. The husband was lazy and irresponsible in nature. So husband deserted her and she started living independently with her son.

Case No.6

A case was of one educated women. Husband's main occupation was 'Bakery'. But he was womanizer in nature. He was involved in extra marital relations with his brother's wife which was observed by her. Due to that reason husband deserted her.

Case No.7

A case was of one educated women who was expert in astrology. She was living in well educated family. Her economic condition was sound. Her husband was serving in a Bank. He was dominant in nature. Husband's sister was dominant in her family. She was always under tension and her husband proved that she was 'mentally disturbed' and deserted her.

Case No.8

A case was of one Montessori teacher. Her husband was educated and excise inspector. The economic background was sound. Her husband and mother-in-law harass her because of dowry. Mother-in-law was dominant. Within a period of two years he deserted her because of dowry.

Case No.9

A case was of an illiterate woman. Her husband was doing masonry work. He was alcoholic in nature. She was also doing masonry work. Husband was beating her often. Husband was very cruel and he exploited her. When her hand was fractured, husband deserted her.

Case No.10

A case was of one illiterate women working as scrap collector. Her husband was painter. He was alcoholic. He married another woman and deserted her.

Case No.11

A case was of one educated woman working as rector. Her husband was doing clerical work in collector office. She was living in sound economic condition. She was disliked by her husband's family except husband. The husband's family blamed her and complained often. All hated her and deserted her.

5. Mainstreaming Rights of Deserted Women: A Livelihood Study of Deserted Women from Sangli district:

The study was conducted with Women's Studies Unit, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai and Stree Mukti Sangharsha Chalwal, Kasegaon, Maharashtra, India (2004-05).

The study aims at understanding and articulating the concerns of deserted women in Maharashtra. The study needs to address two kinds of concerns without which the action programme would remain weak- one would be a conceptual exercise to understand desertion its caste, religion and class dimensions and the other is to quantify the extent and assess the nature of the problem and evolve demands to support the women.

The main goal is to put forth realizable opportunities for livelihood support for single and deserted women of Maharashtra through a better understanding of their socio-cultural and economic conditions.

The study was located in two talukas of Sangli district i.e. Walwa and Khanapur where the struggle of deserted women was very strong in the period during 1986-1995. The researchers have spoken to 143 women from across three talukas of Sangli district. The findings are based on these interactions but importantly on our long standing interactions which spans over more than a decade with these women.

Although the study is based in three talukas of Sangli district its findings and recommendations would be relevant for the entire district as well as the state.

5.1 Choice of methods and data Analysis:

A two staged study was conducted where the first stage involved a quantitative assessment of the socio-economic status of 143 single and deserted women and the second stage was a much smaller sample of 25 women drawn from different caste and religious backgrounds as well as from

different age classes.

5.2 Major study findings:

Single women are a highly deprived and impoverished lot with very little access to either familial property or to government schemes. Many of them have in fact said that they have the responsibility to fend for their children but with few and no resources to do so.

5.3 Caste Profile:

The caste profile of these women shows that desertion is not limited to a single or few castes only. It cuts across caste groups. There are no Brahmans or merchant castes in our study, and the proportion of Maratha-Kunbis, though high, is much less than their percentage of the total population (almost 50% in this region). This is not because these sections lack desertion but because “higher” caste families want to hide the cases of deserted and returned women among them. There is sufficient evidence to show that domestic violence and restrictions on women are higher in both the upper classes and castes.

5.4 Residence and living arrangements:

80% of them are now residing in their natal villages. Only 7.6% women are residing in their marital villages while 11% are actually staying in villages that are neither their natal nor their marital homes. Although most of the women are in their natal villages presently a large number of are in fact staying in independent houses and not sharing the hearth with either their parents or brothers. About 45% of the women who have returned to their natal villages now live in independent households while 35.6% live in joint families. 11.8% of the women live in neither their marital nor their natal villages and have set up their independent households in new villages.

Although they needed the support from their natal homes, as soon as it was possible they have preferred moving out. 60.1% of the total women live in independent households within their marital or natal villages. This is indicative of both a strong will to lead an independent lifestyle as well as in some cases it is a decision willed on the women by either their parents or their brothers with whom they live.

5.5 Reasons for desertion:

The reasons for desertion ranged from alcoholic husband, wife beating, lack of a male heir, complaints of inefficiency at domestic work, suspicion of extramarital affairs, property related matters, widowhood, sexual inadequacy etc. The reasons are wide and sometimes women have been kicked out because she cannot cook fast, sometimes because she didn't ask her husband what food to cook.

Most of the women (53 of 88) have reported that their husbands have remarried after deserting them. However none of the women have shown any willingness to remarry. Women had already been so traumatized by their first marriage that they did not venture into second marriages.

Many cited children as being the main reason for not remarrying. Most Dalit women reported that remarriage is permissible in their community; however they have not opted for that. So although norms do permit remarriage the question often is how much choice do women really have? The constraints on choice are shaped by social and cultural norms and how people look at single hood. She remains stamped as a loose woman even if she remarries, while a man needs to remarry to run the household.

5.6. Way Below the Poverty line and yet not in the BPL:

Most of the women engage in agricultural labor work. Very few of them are able to do anything else but agriculture labor work. Lack of skills to do anything else, lack of access to resources such as credit or land and restrictions on mobility force these women to stay in agriculture labor work alone. Often this labor work is not available for more than 100 days in a year.

All year round work availability of 100 days has meant annual incomes which are largely below Rs 4000/-. Almost 52% of the women have an income which is below Rs 4000/-. The onus of maintaining their children is entirely on them. These are single earner households. If they are residing with their joint families then their entire income has to be deposited with the family and they have no say in the expenditure related decision but usually the trade off is that their children would be taken care of.

Although most of these women are living in poverty, they are not being included in the BPL lists. Almost 60% of these women are recorded as being above the poverty line when the figures show us that only 3.4% have incomes which are above Rs 11,000/-

5.7 Fall back options

The SHG wave does not seem to have spread into these areas. Few of the women have any savings in the SHGs. Many of them still largely depend on large farmers for their borrowing. They do have loans that they have to pay back at interest rates that range from 4-5% per month. Women also have little financial backing from their families who themselves are deeply entrenched in poverty.

5.8 Recommendations:

5.8.1. Registering land and property in the names of wives as well as husbands would not only allow women greater security and stability in the event of a conjugal breakdown, but could also enhance their possibilities for determining household arrangements.

5.8.2. Women might find it easier to ask men to leave home if they know that separation will not entail leaving home themselves and forfeiting their assets. Similarly men would think twice before throwing the woman out of the house or getting a second wife for him.

5.8.3. In general, equal access to property, parity in incomes etc would go a long way in providing security for women. It also provides the space to challenge patriarchy and the dominant

socio-cultural norms that govern the relationships between men and women. In the event of a conjugal breakdown it provides a fall back option.

5.8.4. Greater access to political power (which has only begun at the panchayat and district level) will be a further aid in accessing the resources for their struggles.

5.8.5. Although the study does show that deserted women do develop several imaginative strategies for earning conserving and stretching their income, their financial position would be much better if female earnings were closer to men's. A struggle for parity in incomes for women. in general therefore is a critical in the long term.

6. Study of Deserted Women in Pune District:

A study was conducted by Vidyut Bhagwat and Sharmila Rege of the Women Studies Centre of the University of Pune in association with a city-based NGO Society for Promoting Participative Eco-System Management (SOPPECOM). The study was carried in 2005 to 2008 at Daund and Ghole Road ward area. (cssh.unipune.ernet.in)

6.1 Area of the Study: This study was carried out in Daund taluka and the Ghole Road ward, Pune city. The study was carried in two stages. General data was collected from Daund and Ghole Road ward in the first stage of the study. In the second stage, these women were categorised on the basis of reasons for their desertion for a detailed analysis.

6.2 Causes of Desertion: The causes of desertion in the form of Tables have been obtained from the article. (Shinde Swati, The Times of India, 13/11/2009)

Table 1. Causes of Desertion in Daund Taluka

Causes	No. of Deserted women	Percentage
Extramarital Affairs	52	20.47
Alcoholism	51	20.08
Husband not willing to live together	25	9.84
Mental, Physical torture	22	8.66
Infertility	22	8.66
Dowry	15	5.91
Husband's illness	12	4.72
Second wife	11	4.33
Suspicious of infidelity	10	3.94
Wife's illness	07	2.76
Attempt to molestation	06	2.36
Child Marriage	06	2.36
Abandoning the husband.	02	0.79
Husband's unemployment	02	0.79
Other Reasons	11	4.33
Total	254	100

Table 2. Causes of Desertion in Ghole Road Ward

Causes	No. of Deserted women	Percentage
Extramarital Affairs	28	12.84
Alcoholism	66	30.28
Dowry	04	01.84
Husband's illness	06	02.75
Suspicious of infidelity	08	03.57
Wife's illness	06	02.75
Husband's unemployment	12	05.50
Other reasons	55	25.23
Total	218	100

The different causes shown in the rural and urban areas show that extramarital affair and alcoholism are the main causes of desertion. Husband not willing to live, mental and physical torture and infertility are also causes for desertion especially in rural area.

Kulkarni added that these are the exact reasons that were stated by women in Sangli in 2005, when the group had conducted a study there. "We noticed that the reasons for separation have not changed even after a gap of three years. More importantly, it has remained constant in urban and rural areas, both," she said, adding that the group noticed a change in women's expectations.

"Women become a victim of the husband's misbehaviour and are not even in a position to challenge the reality. If she has to go and complain about her husband's affair, where can she go? In fact, a woman was quoted as saying, 'I went to my parents' home for Diwali and when I returned, I saw my husband married to some other woman. She was employed and was contributing financially to the house, so I was thrown out'," said Sneha Bhat, a research assistant, who has worked closely with this study.

Among other reasons, women said that mental and physical torture by the husband and his family; not being able to bear a male child or infertility; dowry demands; suspicion of infidelity and wife's illness were among the various other reasons for separation.

6.3 Observations of the Study Team:

Anagha Tambe, a WSC members involved with the study, said, "Unavailability of data and negligent documentation on the plight of deserted women triggered us to study their lives. These women have been ignored and shunned by the society for a long time. It has been found that they do not even receive much support from the society once they separate and they start leading an independent life. On the positive side, it has been noted that these women eventually learn to successfully fight all odds." It was shocking when 99 per cent of the women surveyed confessed that they do not want to enter a second marriage ever. Some of the important reasons cited by these women were – children, social stigmas, doubts about being happy with the second marriage and most

importantly, because they did not want to go through a similar experience again in their life.

Medha Thatte, general secretary of Pune Shahar Molkarin Sanghatna, who helped collect data from Pune city, said, “It was surprising to know that these women were quite adamant on not entering a second marriage. Not that there is dignity in marrying for the second time, yet, if their husbands can marry within a month of the separation, then so can these women.”

Vidyut Bhagwat, who retired as the director of Women’s Studies Centre this March was actively involved with this research and in fact has also written the preface of the study said, “We sample size over which we have conducted the survey is very small taking into consideration the magnitude of the issue. However, the problems and issues by and large give a comprehensive picture. We have not touched the issue in a pity compassion framework; neither are we glorifying the institution of marriage here. We want the government to get actively involved towards gender issues and provide suitable welfare for these women. Things like property rights, division of children’s responsibility etc. needs interference by the government and separate laws should be instituted in this matter.”

7. An Overview:

In Indian society certain desirable social changes have occurred, but social disorganization also has occurred because of the undermining of the long established social institutions. In this process of social disorganization, the traditional Hindu marriage and family institutions, marital ethics and values also were altered. The roots of the genesis of the social problem of deserted women can be traced into this process of social disorganization.

A ‘person’ is, first of all, is a member of the ‘family’, the basic social institution. In the contemporary times, the structure and the functioning of this basic social institution have undergone unprecedented changes. Nuclear families have supplanted joint and extended families. The ‘person’ in the nuclear family also is not entirely satisfied with his or her circumstances. The rural migrants settled in cities and towns have to contend with myriad problems of escalating progression. Individually, they also have to grapple with stressful situations like unemployment, lack of money, lack of opportunity, etc. The social disorganization that occurs thus gives rise to numerous problems. The social problem of deserted women is the consequence of such social disorganization.

The proponents of the social disorganization theory believe that one of the counter measures against social disorganization is to establish and reinforce the individual and social behaviour control mechanisms, so as to re-organize the society in the changed milieu. The first important step in this direction would be to make ‘person’ aware of the ethical values so as to bring about a desirable change in his or her personal, familial, community and social behaviour. When the review of the ground level realities of deserted women is made it becomes clear that the person must be made aware of the ethical values to bring a desirable change in his personal and familial behaviour.

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