

The military funerals, investiture of gallantry awards and renaming of buildings and roads across India after the “martyred” soldiers are obsessively reported by the Indian media networks. But what happens to the war widows and their families after the canon salutes have died down, and people moved on to the next eye-catching issue? The transition from being married to widowhood is often tumultuous and extremely painful. It is indeed important to know about the factual situation of the lives of war widows, whose sacrifice for the nation is too great to be ignored.

The three past wars of 1962, 1965 and 1971, the Siachen, IPKF and Kargil operations, long drawn insurgencies in North-East and Jammu & Kashmir coupled with everyday service hazards like ammunition bursts and minefield accidents have resulted in an ever-increasing number of widows. It is a tragedy that leaves them scrambling for survival with tormenting issues of economic, social and physical security.

Even as empowerment endeavours increase, given the patriarchal family set up from which most of them come, most of them end up facing life under very disadvantageous circumstances. The financial aid unaccompanied by socio-legal advice often makes them puppets in the hands of greedy relations. Many of these women are unable to exercise their will and functional autonomy in familial and social spheres. Lack of education and vocational skills leave them without any regular source of income except the army’s pension.

The attitude of the Government, and to some extent the social organisations, have been woefully myopic. For the widows in urban settings, the Army Wives Welfare Association (AWWA) provides in-

# Life After Death

## Glimpses into the Plight of War Widows

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house employment opportunities to those who wish to work. However, the information support with regard to occupation and education of self and children, legal aid and timely counseling are hard to come by for those from rural areas. The compounded difficulties associated with being a single parent, remarrying within the family, denial of justice, social oppression and other such problems loom large in their lives. Our study was carried out in five northern states, comprising the martial belt. These are Delhi, Haryana, Punjab, Rajasthan and Western U.P.

### Our Survey Sample

Districts were selected based on the merit listing in terms of the Quality of Living Index obtained from government records. An equal number of widows of the 1971 war and 1999 Kargil conflict were selected from these districts. The sampling ensured that the war widows studied came from similar socio-cultural backgrounds. Our total sample size was 40 respondents, that is, 28 war widows, and 12 families of unmarried martyrs.

These interviews were carried out from August to November, 2001. We contacted each of them at their homes and interviewed them personally. With the possibility of most of the respondents being illiterate, an in-

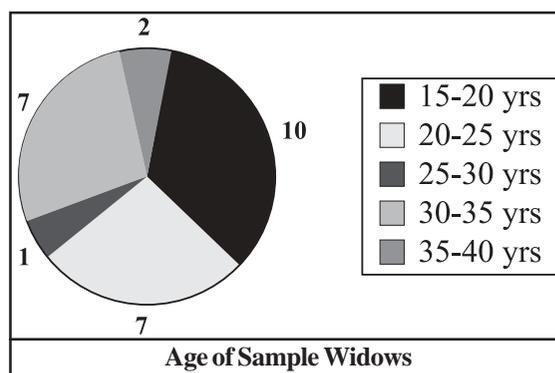
depth interview schedule was structured and pre-tested.

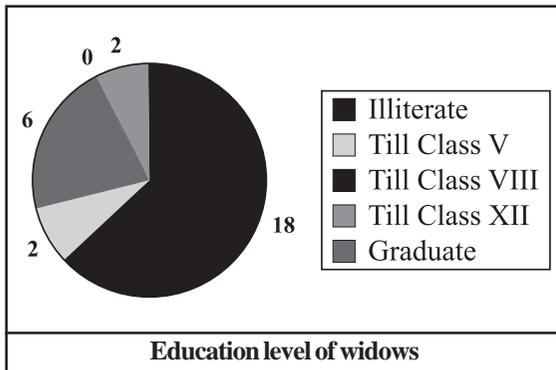
### Summary of Our Findings

**Age of Widows:** The number of very young widows in the age group of 15-20 years was highest in Delhi and followed by Rajasthan. Comparatively, Haryana and Punjab had older widows. The age at the time of marriage was related to their literacy levels and economic independence. Younger widows were illiterate or studied only until primary level.

**Literacy level of the widows:** The majority of widows in all the states is illiterate. Only twenty one percent of them had attended school till class VIII. Overall, widows from Haryana showed the highest literacy levels while those from Rajasthan had the lowest.

**Occupation practiced:** Only 50 per cent of the widows worked outside their homes despite dire necessity to earn a living. Some performed petty jobs as agricultural labourers, peons, raising livestock and so on. Still, it was encouraging to know that 14 percent of the sample





was handling gas agencies allotted to them.

**Relations with in-laws:** Almost 50 percent of the widows lived with in-laws after their husband's demise. The number of widows living independently was the highest in Western U.P. followed by Delhi. This was due to strained relations or need-based reasons like the provision of residential facilities by the Government or the proximity to occupational facilities like gas agencies or petrol pumps.

**Status of remarriage:** Only 29 percent of the sampled widows got remarried. In most of the cases, remarriage was within the family, with an older or younger brother-in-law. Reasons for doing so, as came to light, included: protection of the family interests, prevention of division of lands, and taking benefit of the family pension and lump sum financial assistance available to the martyr's widow. Most of the remarried war widows accepted this arrangement as a compromise, despite their reservations.

**Financial assistance received:** Significant difference was observed in the financial assistance received by widows of 1971 Indo-Pak war and the Kargil war. We also observed interstate disparities. Some of the widows of the 1971 war, reportedly did not receive any benefits except a meagre pension. The widows of the Kargil war from Haryana, Punjab and

Rajasthan received compensation as high as 26 lakhs while their counterparts in Delhi and western U.P. got no more than 10-15 lakhs. It was observed during the survey that many of the war widows were neither aware of the source nor about the manner

in which financial assistance was received by them. Most of them, since illiterate, were unable to conduct any monetary transaction, and on this pretext, it was the head of the family who came into the picture to receive financial grants on behalf of the widow.

**Other benefits offered:** In all, 14 petrol pumps/gas agencies were allotted in five states. Around 25 percent of the respondents had taken an additional Rs.5 lakhs in lieu of the housing facility. Ten percent of the respondents' children were receiving free education in army schools and 20 percent had received agricultural land. The other facilities reported to have been received were: concessions for telephone facilities, air and railway travel, medical aid, counseling and professional guidance. However, in many cases, the benefits were utilized by in-laws. In the case of 14 percent of the respondents, the employment opportunity was taken away from the widow by the in-laws.

Some widows themselves declined the given job for reasons like distance from home, illiteracy, lack of skills, family pressure, young children etc. Despite a large number of welfare schemes, awareness about the

same among the widows was dismal. They did not know the accurate and specific information even on the schemes they had availed of. The heavy burden of paper work and official formalities and the need for a whole range of documents were also found to be the major hurdles for these women.

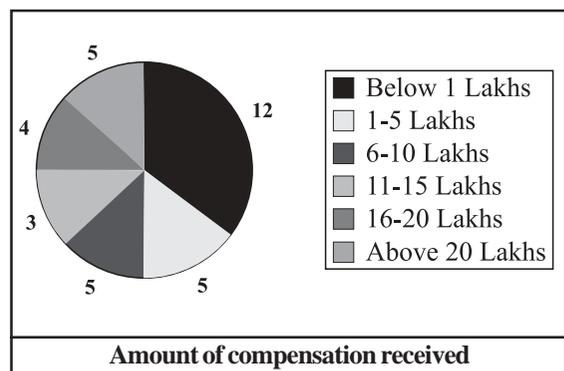
**Willingness of martyr's kin to join the Army:** The widows, particularly of the 1971 war, showed discontent and resentment, probably due to the indifferent attitude of the Government with regard to their fate. On the contrary, the entire sample from Western U.P. wanted their children to join the Army.

### Our Recommendations

The sensitive emotional and psychological aspects of socio-economic rehabilitation of widows are often ignored. Very few women are prepared for the harsh realities of widowhood, new emerging equations with in-laws and the discriminatory attitude of many community members.

Keeping in mind that such a tragedy can befall them at any stage of their life, it is important that Army wives are prepared and empowered in advance.

It should be mandatory for soldiers to orient their wives to the Army culture, its organization and its administrative set-up. All women, irrespective of their husband's rank, must be given opportunities for



capacity building. This could be in terms of formal training in functional literacy and social exposure, financial management, vocational training, crisis management etc.

□ To make the Sainik Boards more effective, a serving officer in uniform and a few of his subordinates should directly monitor their functioning. These officers should get their Annual Confidential Reports on the basis of their performance at the respective Sainik Boards. The District Collector also can be made an honorary member of these bodies. A deputation of women welfare officers in all state and district Zila Sainik Boards is vital. This officer could be a released woman officer from the services, a widow, or an educated girl from the martyr's family.

□ The Zila Sainik Board, being the most important unit, with direct outreach to the ex-servicemen and the martyrs' families, should be geared towards providing vocational training to the widows or any other dependent of the dead soldier's family who makes a commitment to take care of the widow.

□ The Army needs to set up liberalised family pension for all widows irrespective of the nature of causalities. In addition, there should be a uniform rehabilitation package inclusive of matching grant for widows of defence personnel across all states and union territories.

□ War widows must be consulted in the formulation of policies for their welfare. There should be a public announcement of a practical plan for rehabilitation and relief measures for women in service and war widows.

□ Employment opportunities should be created for war widows in army canteens, hospitals, schools etc.

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