



SWAN

Single Women's Action Network



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Single Women's Action Network II State Convention Demand

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1 Introduction

1.1 Single women: Definition

Single women are single out of choice or compulsion. The path to become 'single' is different. Some remain single for life (never married), or are married for a while and then are separated, deserted, divorced, or widowed. Some are even termed 'half-widows' especially in fisher communities, when the fate of the husband is unknown. Though technically married, some are virtually 'single', and some worse than single, at the hands of an abusive spouse. All of them face some form of stigma and victim blaming.

There is a need for a wholistic, comprehensive definition that encompasses the many forms of 'singleness' collectively while retaining their distinctness. This is required to acknowledge the extent of the experience and to design specific support systems for each.

1.2 Challenges

Single women face the inherent misogyny of the society and the government machinery that results in hesitation to fulfil entitlements. 'What if she gets married' is the often unspoken, and sometimes spoken, excuse for denial especially of jobs. The system literally waits for the woman to be destitute before the fragile safety net kicks in.

The response should be intersectional, mindful of multiple vulnerability. The intent should be to address the cumulative vulnerability faced so that they can become self-reliant to the maximum degree possible. A main consideration is that these are in addition to the general entitlements available to all citizens. For instance, a single woman with disability should get all entitlements available to women, all entitlements available to persons with disabilities, and the entitlements for single women. Only then she will be able to move out from dependency to self-reliance.

1.3 Common demands for all single women

- The first demand is the inclusion of singleness, in its various dimensions, into the questionnaire for the next census.
- This holistic definition should be the basis of identification and eligibility for social security support.
- Implement programmes to systematically help the women (who often have no marketable skills) to become self-reliant starting from going back to school along with her children if need be, vocational training, and livelihood support (employment, self-employment, or entrepreneurship).
- Prioritise single women in existing social benefit schemes, and have horizontal reservations for them.
- Increase the state supported free education of single women and their children up to graduation.
- Many single women are vendors. Implement the street vendors Act in letter and spirit. They should be given an ID card, and priority access to market facilities, procurement, and access to transport.



- Immediate issue and updating of eligibility documentation, relief, and pension, with unimpeded access to common assets and properties.
- Access to credit is a significant road block. Start SHGs exclusively for single women. Initiate loan schemes prioritising single women, tailored to their specific needs. They should be given additional 100 points in the CIBIL score, interest rate reduction, and additional subsidy in loans.
- Strengthen cooperatives with a separate cooperative bank only for single women.
- Access to welfare boards should be automatic and time-bound. They should be automatically enrolled in their husband's welfare board and get all the benefits. If they are enrolled in a welfare board, they should get priority in benefits as long as they are single.
- All single women working as contract labourers in government departments and municipal services should be absorbed as permanent workers with entitlements such as ESI.
- The scholarship of school going children of single women should be Rs 5,000 per month.
- Single women's pension (eligibility 55 years of age) should be enhanced to Rs 10,000 per month.

2 Widows

2.1 Definition:

A woman becomes a widow on the death of her husband, pushing her into a precarious situation with little support systems.

2.2 Challenges:

Several customs stigmatise her, blame her for her husband's death, prevent her from coming out of the house for extended periods of time to access relief, make her dependent on the charity of others for life and livelihood, and severely curtail her self-reliance and self-esteem. All the assets are taken away impoverishing her and her children.

The government personnel, processes, and paper work for identity, transfer of entitlements and assets is very hostile. Some of them even ask for sexual favours. Sexual innuendo is common.

2.3 Demands:

- The government processes and paper work for identity, transfer of entitlements and assets should be automatic and timebound. All issue of documents (including death certificate and widow certificate), updates and transfers (property, ration cards, welfare board membership) should be automatic and timebound (within 15 days)
- Only women should be welfare officers in charge of these processes.
- All practices (social, cultural, or religious) that demean widows should be outlawed and their practice should be punishable.
- Awareness programmes should be conducted to eliminate these practices, including those that suggest witchcraft or causing bad luck or disease.

3 Young widows (TASMAC deaths)

3.1 Definition:

Those whose husbands had an untimely demise due to alcohol addiction.

3.2 Challenges:

Liquor shops around villages leads to alcohol addiction, and consequently death at an early age. Due to the early age of marriage, this leaves behind a young widow who (some of them teens), with virtually no schooling or marketable skills with dependent children.

The revenue from the sale of liquor is less than the revenue foregone due to the ill health of the consumers, and less than the expenditure on health (rehabilitation and end-of-life support) that arises due to alcohol consumption.

3.3 *Demands:*

- All liquor shops should be removed from villages and their surroundings. The presently addicted persons should be rehabilitated.
- Alternate forms of bonding, such as sports and games, should be actively promoted with state level recognition for the champions.
- A law should be passed declaring invalid the 'marriages' where either or both of the persons are below the age of 18, as suggested by the Supreme Court of India.
- There should be special support schemes for the widow and her children to go back to school, get vocational training, and working capital support, so that her livelihood is secure.

4 Widow – caste–murder (multiple vulnerability)

4.1 *Definition:*

A woman who has become a widow because her husband has been murdered due to inter-caste marriage or caste-based atrocities.

4.2 *Challenges:*

These women are victims of false caste-pride. They, their children, and relatives remain extremely vulnerable physically, socially, and economically. They are cut off from all support systems, and are often ostracised by their families as well.

The present legal provisions are insufficient to protect or rehabilitate them, despite the official government position.

4.3 *Demands:*

- Pass a Special Act to protect couples in inter-caste or choice marriages, and to rehabilitate victims of such killings.
- It should specifically protect both spouses, with rehabilitation available for the survivor irrespective of caste.
- The protective and rehabilitative aspects could draw from the SCs and the STs (Prevention of Atrocities) Act and Rules, but should go beyond them in acknowledging the vulnerability of both the spouse and therefore the eligibility of both for protection and rehabilitation.
- The survivor support should continue even on remarriage.

5 Widow – sewer/manual scavenging murder (multiple vulnerability)

5.1 *Definition:*

Women whose husbands have died due to sewer deaths or manual scavenging.

5.2 *Challenges:*

Manual scavenging is not acknowledged by the government. The women are very vulnerable to stigma even after the compensation since many hide their husband's occupation.

5.3 *Demands:*

- Acknowledge that the problem of manual scavenging exists.
- Ensure rehabilitation (of the women) and prevention (for the children), by providing a government job (to the wife), and educational opportunities (to the children).

6 Fish-workers (Marine, half-widow)

6.1 Definition:

Women whose husbands are 'missing-at-sea'.

6.2 Challenges:

The uncertainty of the fate of their husbands takes an emotional toll on the women. These women have to wait for seven years before appropriate support is provided to her or the family. This places an additional economic burden and is detrimental to the well-being of the family, especially the children whose needs are time-specific.

The welfare board membership (and paid for benefits) are denied to the widows of the fishers by the marine fisheries welfare board. This denial is prevalent in the inland fisheries welfare board as well.

6.3 Demands:

- Reduce the waiting time from seven years to six months, with safeguards.
- The women and children should be visited by the ASHA worker at least once a month to assess her physical and mental wellbeing.
- The DCPO should visit the children at least once a month to ensure that they get the required support for schooling and mental health.
- Immediate membership (if not already done) to the respective welfare board.

7 Textile workers

7.1 Definition:

Single women of any age working in the textile industry.

7.2 Challenges:

The textile industry prefers young single women, especially young single women. The working conditions adversely affect their health, especially their respiratory and reproductive health. These have lifelong effects during and long after their employment.

Physical and verbal abuse with sexual overtones are rampant, though the women seldom report them due to stigma and victim shaming.

7.3 Demands:

- Functional, independent internal committees for awareness, prevention, and protection from sexual harassment in the workplace.
- Occupational health inspections and remedies should be monitored and remedied every quarter. This should include the long-term effects of occupational ergonomics, sexual and reproductive health, and the respiratory system.

8 Sex-workers

8.1 Definition:

Women whose livelihood is dependent on sex-work.

8.2 Challenges:

Most sex-workers are single women. Their income is restricted to an extremely limited age range. They are vulnerable to disease at a higher rate than other workers. They are ineligible for most entitlements, and have no social security for their retirement.

Since their home does not usually offer a conducive environment for academic pursuits, their children often get into low-paying crime-prone lifestyles. There are no safe-spaces, playgrounds, or tuition centres to retain children in the academic world.

8.3 *Demands:*

- Legalise sex-work.
- Provide them with social protections (health care) and entitlements (housing).
- Ensure that their children are enrolled in school, and retention measures are in place.

9 Separated/ vulnerable to domestic/intimate partner violence

9.1 *Definition:*

Women separated from their husbands/intimate partners and/or facing violence from them.

9.2 *Challenges:*

They are most vulnerable to violence including physical harm and death in addition to asset stripping and torture. Access to the children is often used as bargaining points to keep them in situations of violence.

The long delay in case disposal (49 years to clear pending cases of domestic violence, as per Crime In India 2022) despite the fast track special courts (FTSC) and the ePOCSO courts, holds women hostage, and puts their lives in limbo.

9.3 *Demands:*

- Sufficient special courts should be set up for domestic violence cases so that they can be cleared within 60 days.
- More functional one stop centres.
- Periodic (monthly or more frequent) home visits by the ASHA workers and women police to households reporting domestic violence.

10 Burns/Acid attack victims

10.1 *Definition:*

Single women who have suffered burns and/or acid attack.

10.2 *Challenges:*

These women are often at the receiving end of male entitlement and privilege. While burns are often within marriage, acid attack is before marriage (often on rejection).

There is a continuing threat of violence that makes life itself precarious. The continuing threat makes employment difficult, not least because even emphatic employers fear for the safety of other workers in case the stalker violence follows the victim.

Their mental trauma and physical well-being require constant lifelong care. Reconstructive surgery is also a life-long requirement. Neither are covered by the relief provisions.

10.3 *Demands:*

- Lifetime free of cost medical treatment in hospitals with appropriate specialists and equipment for treatment of burns and acid including trauma.
- Lifetime protection, if necessary by externment of the perpetrator and accomplices.
- Compensation based on income foregone, opportunity cost, trauma, and punitive damages, to be paid by the state, and recoverable from the perpetrator and accomplices including from their ancestral property.

11 Divorced

11.1 *Definition:*

Women whose legal divorce has been granted.

11.2 Challenges:

Once the divorce decree is final, the women face additional hurdles in getting the terms implemented. The legal process itself drains much of her stamina. The retaliation of husbands unsatisfied with the verdict often translates into violence.

Restarting their life – which includes getting back to paid employment, returning to the maiden name (which would be the name on her certificates), a new ration card, accommodation, are all a struggle due to social norms and government procedures. Casual sexual harassment is widespread.

11.3 Demands:

- Bridge programmes and schemes to revive livelihoods and be employment ready.
- Mechanisms to enforce court orders.

12 Single women with disabilities (multiple vulnerability)

12.1 Definition:

Women with any form of physical or mental disability, that requires constant care and support.

12.2 Challenges:

Women with disabilities are often unmarried and considered unmarriageable even by their paternal families. Sometimes, they are considered a burden on their families. While their life and livelihood is fragile at all times, after the death of their parents, their life becomes extremely precarious.

As girls, they are denied opportunities to acquire marketable skills for a self-reliant livelihood and therefore the dependency is built in. At all times dependent on the family goodwill and charity, life becomes progressively precarious as she ages.

12.3 Demands:

- Ensure special attention to girls with disabilities so that they acquire marketable skills for self-reliance at a young age.
- Ensure community based care and support systems so that they can live as self-reliant a life as possible.
- ASHA workers visit at least once a week or more frequently as required.

13 Single women with children with disabilities (multiple vulnerability)

13.1 Definition:

Single women who have at least one child with disabilities.

13.2 Challenges:

The effort to take care of a child with disability is double or triple for a single woman. Sometimes, the woman becomes single because the husband abandons her due to his inability to deal with a child with disability – though the child is his own.

13.3 Demands:

- Have a graded system where the impact of the multiple vulnerabilities in a family is taken into account, and more support is provided to them (rather than just addition).

14 Never married women

14.1 Definition:

Women who have not been married ever, and are past the usual marriage age for their community.

14.2 Challenges:

The normal age of marriage varies between communities – from 12 to 30 years of age in the case of women. They face the social pressure of having missed out in life and becoming a burden to their families. They do not have control over their income. Their right to secure residence is fragile and is often dependent on the goodwill of the male. Forfeiting their entire income, loss of bodily autonomy, moral policing, and restricted use of family assets is the usual cost.

All single women are working women – they have no choice. Outside the household, like all other single women, she is more vulnerable to sexual harassment since she is considered sexually available.

14.3 Demands:

- Secure accommodation, safe commute and workspace (including for street vending).
- Age appropriate social security and safety net.