



**A Single Women's
Agenda for
Just Futures**

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Introduction

For nearly two centuries now, social reformers have been concerned about the condition of widows in India. Through efforts of social reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Pandita Ramabai, who were pivotal in raising awareness about the plight of widows and pushing for social reforms, the British were forced to implement various policies and laws that alleviated the plight of widows. The practice of *sati*, where widows were expected to self-immolate upon their husband's funeral pyre, was officially abolished by the British in 1829, but societal pressures and stigma persisted. Additionally, inheritance laws often left widows marginalised and vulnerable to exploitation by male relatives.

The Widow Remarriage Movement emerged in the 19th century as a response to the social stigma and discrimination faced by widows. During this time, widows in India were often ostracised, denied basic rights and confined to a life of seclusion and hardship. The movement challenged these oppressive practices and advocated for the rights of widows to remarry and lead fulfilling lives. The movement gained momentum with the support of social reformers, intellectuals, and progressive thinkers who campaigned for legislative changes to legalise widow remarriage and abolish discriminatory practices. In 1856, the British government passed the Widow Remarriage Act, which allowed Hindu widows to remarry.

In independent India, social reformers continued to play a crucial role in advocating for the rights and welfare of widows, challenging centuries-old customs and practices that subjected them to discrimination and marginalisation. Their efforts contributed to significant progress in improving the lives of widows and fostering a more inclusive and equitable society.

Some decades ago, activists working on the issue realised that along with widows, a range of other women face similar vulnerabilities.

In conflict affected areas, and areas where deaths due to animal-human encounters are endemic, unique nomenclatures have emerged: "half-widows" in Kashmir are wives of men who are missing and "tiger-widows" in the Sundarbans whose husbands are suspected to have been killed by tigers and whose bodies are not recovered. Due to the ambiguity surrounding the men's disappearance, the wives are unable to access any social security scheme or government assistance. Then there are women who are separated, divorced, or abandoned by their spouses, as well as women who, out of choice or due to compelling circumstances, have never married, many of whom act as mothers or caregivers.

From the experience of working with all these categories of women, who by choice or compulsion are and stay single, and for that reason face a unique set of challenges and vulnerabilities, activists argue for the recognition of a category of women who, for want of a better word, are called "Ekal Nari" or "Single Women".

Working on the issue of child marriage has helped ActionAid Association realise that girls and women are put under greater pressure than boys and men to get married. Historically, marriage has been ingrained as a significant milestone for women, symbolising stability, security, and societal acceptance. In the debate about raising the age of marriage to 21 years for both men and women (currently it is 21 years for men and 18 years for women), it is argued that raising the age will allow women to obtain higher education, which is a challenge after marriage at the age of 18.

While the pressure on women to get married is a complex interplay of societal, cultural, and personal factors, addressing these constraints requires challenging traditional norms, promoting gender equality and empowering women to make choices based on their own aspirations and priorities. Thus, the only way we, as a society can ensure that marriage for a woman is an exercise of free choice is if we can ensure that the alternative i. e. of remaining single, has the same social and economic viability. This will only be possible if single women do not face any stigma, discrimination or bias due to their marital status.

Current Situation

Currently single women in India face pervasive biases and discrimination across various spheres of life, including within their own homes, communities and governmental policies. There are approximately 73 million single women in the country, according to the 2011 census. Despite some acknowledgment of their challenges in documents like the Draft National Policy for Women, 2016, which recognises the condition of single women, including widows, separated, divorced, deserted, and unmarried women, the government does not consider single women to be a population with specific needs.

Unfortunately, the term "single" in policy discussions often narrowly focuses on widows, leaving out other categories of single women. Consequently, due to this lack of recognition, with the exception of those designated for widows, schemes and welfare provisions specifically tailored for single women are conspicuously absent at the central level. Around 13 million households in the country are headed by single mothers who lack adequate social support systems, yet there are no mechanisms in place to assist them. Despite being significant contributors to the economy, comprising the majority of the female workforce, single women lack institutional mechanisms for promoting their participation and protecting their rights both at work and at home. Furthermore, single women encounter numerous legal and social barriers in accessing their entitlements due to their single status, as most identity documents require parental addresses or the mention of a guardian or spouse. This impedes their access to essential services, excluding them from umbrella schemes, despite their eligibility.

The prevailing social and legal system in India is predominantly structured around the institution of marriage, posing significant challenges and sometimes insurmountable barriers for single women. However, at the state level, there is a noticeable shift towards a more positive approach, with some states implementing social security schemes specifically targeting single women as a category. For instance, Rajasthan has introduced the Ekal Nari Samman Pension Yojana, while Andhra Pradesh and Telangana have implemented Single Women Pension Schemes. Tamil Nadu has established the Widow and Destitute Women Welfare Board, to provide tailored services to widows, destitute,

deserted, vulnerable, and unmarried women, recognising their unique challenges.

Despite these localised efforts, the majority of single women across the country still remain unrecognised and invisible. Their voices go unheard, and their specific needs remain unaddressed within broader governmental policies and programmes.

Another challenge that single women often face is witch branding, a harrowing and archaic practice rooted in superstition and patriarchal beliefs. Accused of sorcery or witchcraft, these women endure social ostracism, violence, and even murder. Their solitary status makes them vulnerable targets, devoid of familial protection. Witch branding perpetuates gender inequality and denies these women basic human rights. To combat this injustice, concerted efforts are needed, including legal reforms, community education, and support networks. Empowering single women and challenging regressive attitudes are essential steps towards eradicating this egregious form of discrimination and ensuring their safety and dignity.

A Single Women's Agenda for Just Futures

ActionAid Association (AAA) has been working with single women for over two decades to build collectives to enable them to claim their rights and entitlements. AAA's understanding of the vulnerabilities and issues faced by single women came from the humanitarian work conducted during the Super Cyclone in Jagatsinghpur, Odisha in 1999 and the Gujarat earthquake in 2001. AAA interventions in Gujarat saw for the first time a focused effort to protect the rights of single women as one of the most vulnerable groups during such calamities. This happened through the efforts of the disaster response team, Sneh Samuday, whose continuing work with single women led to the creation of the Ekal Nari Shakti Manch, which played a critical role in the formation of the National Forum for Single Women's Rights, which has been working to influence policy. Recognising the wide-ranging vulnerabilities of single women, ActionAid Association since then has been actively working towards enabling them their rights and a life of dignity in diverse contexts. Over the years, it has been in solidarity with the wives of farmers who committed suicide in Maharashtra, the wives of men who have disappeared in Kashmir,

the landless single women in Odisha, the single fisherwomen in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, the women branded as “witches” in Madhya Pradesh and several other states.

A Single Women's Agenda for Just Futures emerges from a series of fresh conversations amongst communities, with the active participation of community leaders and also informed by ActionAid Association's long engagement with the community and the issues they face.

1. Recognition of Single Women

Without proper recognition, single women are at risk of being overlooked and underserved by existing legal frameworks and social welfare programmes. This lack of acknowledgment and institutional framework not only deprives them of essential rights and protections but also perpetuates their vulnerability to exploitation and discrimination. The current generic approaches to welfare and development for women fail to cater to the specific circumstances faced by single women, leading to inadequate support. Therefore, there is an urgent need to establish a robust institutional framework that can provide focused attention and resources to uplift and empower single women, ensuring their inclusion, welfare, and protection.

- 1.1 A National Single Women Policy for the empowerment, social security, dignified living, and protection of legal rights of single women should be formulated.
- 1.2 Special focus should be given to single women living in poverty, particularly those belonging to marginalised communities such as Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Other Backward Classes (OBC), DNTs (De-Notified Tribes, who were formerly classified as Criminal Tribes by the British government), Muslims and sexual minorities. These groups face compounded vulnerabilities due to their unique intersectional identities, warranting additional attention and targeted assistance to address their distinct challenges.
- 1.3 Special attention must be directed towards single women with children, acknowledging and addressing their distinct needs.

- 1.4 Amendments must be made in existing policies and programmes so that all single women, can avail all benefits of pensions, child support, housing, skill training etc.
- 1.5 Survey and socio-economic mapping studies should be conducted regarding single women's social status, assets, livelihood, income and their access to essential facilities. The data can be used while preparing action plans for various issues of single women and their empowerment.
- 1.6 Institutional Mechanism:
 - 1.6.1 Allocation of funds for single women: Dedicated funds should be earmarked for the empowerment and development of single women.
 - 1.6.2 SA Single Women Cell should be established within the National Commission for Women and the State Women Commissions to address the problems faced by single women all over the country and to take special steps for their development and empowerment.
 - 1.6.3 A District Level Committee composed of members selected from the Block committees should be established.
 - 1.6.4 Monthly district-level meetings should be conducted to facilitate communication and coordination. Training should be provided for Village and Block Level Committees to enhance their skills and capabilities.
 - 1.6.5 Collaborate with District-level NGOs to synergize efforts and maximize impact.

2. Definition and Identification of Single Women

The term single woman is understood in the context of a woman's marital status and whether she has a husband or not. The definition of single woman should be clarified at all administrative, social, legal and governance levels to remove the established confusion about all categories of women for whom the term single woman is used. It has been generally accepted by organisations working for single women that these categories should be listed universally.

- 2.1 An inclusive definition of "single women" should be adopted, including
 - (a) Widows
 - (b) Legally divorced women
 - (c) Separated women
 - (d) Abandoned/deserted women
 - (e) Never married women
 - (f) Women whose husbands are missing (half-widows, tiger-widows etc).

- 2.2 Identification Procedure
 - 2.2.1 Single women should be registered with local self-governance bodies and a separate register should be maintained.
 - 2.2.2. An identification document should be issued certifying them as "single women".
 - 2.2.3 Certification of separated/abandoned/deserted women:
 - 2.2.3.1. While desertion typically becomes grounds for divorce after a two-year period, the eligibility criteria for accessing social security benefits vary considerably state-wise for abandoned and deserted women. There should be a uniform and suitable time period of years for identification as a single woman.
 - 2.2.3.2. In rural areas, the gram panchayat should undertake certification of a woman as 'single' after a process of self-declaration. This process must be carried out under the supervision of local government workers such as teachers, nurses, aanganwadi workers, postmen etc, or NGO staff working in the ward.
 - 2.2.3.3. In urban areas, the ward councillor or municipal ward members should undertake certification of a woman as 'single' after a process of self-

declaration. The process must be carried out in the presence of local government workers or NGO staff working in the ward.

2.2.4. Certification of "Half-Widows"

- 2.2.4.1. Women whose husbands have been missing for a certain period face uncertainty and lack clear guidelines about their status. Currently, a person is presumed dead after seven years of absence. To address this, we propose offering temporary certification after one year of absence, designating them as single women until the seven-year threshold is reached or the spouse is found. This interim measure will provide clarity and access to necessary support during the period of uncertainty.
- 2.2.4.2. For women whose husbands are missing, following one year from the date on which the Missing Person FIR was filed, the woman should be entitled to receive a certificate from the concerned government officer, affirming her status as a "single woman."
- 2.2.4.3. In case the missing husband returns, the beneficiary should inform the concerned officer with a self-declaration, which can be attested by local bodies such as the panchayat. (The process can be in line with remarriage in case of widows.)
- 2.2.4.4. In rural areas, if no FIR has been filed, the sarpanch and 2 other village residents or government workers (teachers, nurses, aanganwadi workers, midwives, postmen) who know the situation can give in writing that the woman has not had any contact with her husband/partner for one year or more. The concerned government officer, after receiving this documentation, should issue the "single woman" certificate.

3. Prioritising Single Women in On-going Programmes and Schemes

Single women often face hurdles in accessing available benefits due to legal and administrative barriers. Certain categories of single women may also be excluded from availing benefits as was seen in Tamil Nadu where deserted women were excluded from accessing family pension available to widows, divorced and unmarried daughters. Single women also face challenges in obtaining necessary documents such as identity proofs, residential proofs, PAN cards, and ration cards, rendering them unable to access social security measures. For instance, single women or widows without a ration card are unable to access pension benefits.

- 3.1. Registration: Ensure that all single women are registered with their local self-governance bodies to facilitate access to social welfare benefits.
- 3.2. In order to counter the regressive social forces that stigmatise and discriminate against single women, prioritise single women in all welfare schemes and programmes. This includes schemes related to essential services such as education, healthcare and social security, housing, land distribution, tax benefits, farmer welfare such as technical support or credit support, skill-building and trainings, employment, entrepreneurship, and protection and rehabilitation of women affected by violence.
- 3.3. Single women should be allowed to constitute themselves as a single household for the purposes of securing entitlements like ration card. Presently, women separated from their husbands or parents often lose access to benefits due to their inability to obtain separate cards. In Tamil Nadu, single women living alone have been recognised as family and separate ration cards can be issued to divorced and unmarried women.
- 3.4. Ensure that single women have access to all social security schemes meant for the universal population and/or for marginalised groups, including education facilities, health services, public distribution system (PDS), Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojna (PMAY), etc. by addressing administrative barriers.

3.5. Provide sub-classification for single women where reservation has been made for women, including reservation for single women in government services at both the state and centre. This can be along the lines of the reservation provided in Rajasthan, where 30% of posts are reserved for women, out of which one-third are reserved for widows and divorcees.

3.6. A single window system should be developed to streamline all government schemes, social security benefits and other policy interventions related to single women.

4. Women's Right to Property

Single women frequently encounter various socio-cultural, legal, and economic barriers to property ownership and inheritance rights, denying them access to valuable assets and economic security. This perpetuates their economic dependency and heightened vulnerability. Prevailing discriminatory personal and customary laws in India continue to impede women's access to property rights. Women also face societal pressure to relinquish their claims to property and are denied support from extended family members. Economic constraints, including limited financial resources and lack of access to legal assistance, pose additional barriers, making it difficult for single women to navigate the legal system and assert their rights.

4.1 Reform in Inheritance Laws:

4.1.1. Ensure that daughters have equal rights to inheritance in their parent's property, by amending the existing disparities in inheritance laws under personal and customary laws. For instance, due to the customary laws of Punjab and Haryana applicable to the Meo community, daughters are denied the right to succession in both the ancestral and non-ancestral property of their fathers.

4.1.2. The legal right of daughters to father's land as per the Hindu Succession Act – regardless of whether she is divorced, separated or widowed, must be clear. If a single woman is living on land for which she has no ownership papers, the

law should be that she cannot be displaced until there is some compensation/rehabilitation.

4.2. Ownership in Property:

4.2.1. Wives should be entitled to an equal share in their husband's self-acquired property, regardless of whether it was acquired before or during the marriage. In case of sale or transfer of land and/or property, the consent of women dependent on the male owner, should be made a legal necessity.

4.2.2. At the time of separation, abandonment, or divorce, women must be entitled to at least half of the assets acquired by the couple during the period that they have lived together, in addition to maintenance if any. All property acquired after marriage of either spouse should be treated as a unit between the couple, regardless of whether the woman financially or monetarily contributes to the family income, as her contribution to the household in terms of household work, home management, childbearing and care entitles her to half of it.

4.3. The stamp duty for registration of land and house purchased in a single woman's name and gift deeds of immovable property executed in favour of single women should be reduced. Some states including Haryana, Rajasthan, Punjab, Maharashtra, Uttarakhand, Bihar etc. already have varying concessions for women.

4.4. Training and capacity-building programmes should be provided to enhance the financial literacy and legal knowledge of single women, enabling them to make informed decisions regarding their property rights and effectively navigate the legal system.

5. Economic Empowerment

Single women encounter significant barriers when seeking employment opportunities due to various factors such as social discrimination, entrenched traditions, limited resources and fewer opportunities. Traditional gender roles and familial expectations may force single women to rely on male relatives for financial stability, further perpetuating

their economic dependence and vulnerability. Lacking access to formal employment and financial services, many single women are compelled to engage in informal and precarious work arrangements, leaving them economically vulnerable and susceptible to exploitation.

5.1. Single women should be given preference in jobs and promotions.

5.2. The inclusion of single women in village, mandal and district-level job opportunities should be promoted.

5.3. Funds should be allocated in the budget specifically for initiatives aimed at supporting the livelihoods of single women. These schemes may include vocational training, entrepreneurship programmes and financial assistance to help single women become economically self-sufficient.

5.4. Education & Skill Building:

5.4.1. Schemes like the National Urban Livelihoods Mission, National Livestock Mission, and Aajeevika stipulate that at least one third of total beneficiaries must be women. Single women should comprise at least one-third of the women beneficiaries.

5.4.2 Single women who wish to continue their education through open schools, universities or bridge courses should be given scholarships up to 50 percent (up to 80 percent if they are from BPL families) of the total fee.

5.5. Access to Financial Services

5.5.1. Savings societies should be established to promote financial empowerment, enabling self-employment opportunities through accumulated savings.

5.5.2. Single women entrepreneurship should be prioritised under schemes like Mudra. Banks and micro-finance institutions providing loans to single women through Mudra should offer reduced interest rates.

5.5.3. Under the Stand-up India scheme, which aims to facilitate loans between Rs. 10 lakh and Rs. 1 crore to one SC, one

ST, and one woman per bank branch to set up a greenfield enterprise, preference should be given to single women.

- 5.5.4. Cooperatives of single women or those with predominantly single women members should receive prioritised access to subsidised loans from cooperative banks.

6. Addressing Violence Against Single Women

Single women are at high risk of sexual and gender-based violence as in a patriarchal society they are perceived to be weak in the absence of a male partner or due to abandonment by their families. Single women also face violence, even while living in the home of the natal or marital family due to their marital status. They are also disproportionately targeted through practices such as witch branding.

- 6.1 A comprehensive national law should be formulated to abolish witch-branding and rehabilitate and support survivors, as this practice disproportionately targets single women belonging to marginalised sections of society. A uniform law that takes into account all aspects of prevention, retribution, protection and rehabilitation is needed. The existing laws are clearly inadequate. For example, the Prevention of Witch Practices Act, 1999 only imposes a fine of Rs. 1000 on an identified (someone who identifies or brands a woman as a witch). It also has no mention of rehabilitation of women who are branded as witches. Similarly, Jharkhand's Prevention of Witch (DAAIN) Practices Act, 2001 has been criticised by activists for neither being able to provide effective prevention, amelioration and rehabilitation for victims nor adequate punishment for the perpetrators.
- 6.2. Practices that encourage widow oppression and exploitation of single women, such as the Devadasi system, should be strictly outlawed with proper implementation of the law. For example, more than thirty-six years after the Karnataka Devadasis (Prohibition of Dedication) Act of 1982 was passed, the State government is yet to issue the rules for administering the law. This issue must be taken up immediately.

- 6.3. The functioning of the local complaints committee at the district level should be reviewed and improved to ensure protection against sexual harassment for single women employees.
- 6.4. District level fast track courts should be established to ensure speedy trial in incidents of violence against single women, land and housing related disputes and other relevant issues pertaining to their rights.
- 6.5. Trainings should be conducted with police officers at the block level to sensitise them to issues of single women and remedial processes.

7. Addressing Stigma and Discrimination

In order to enable single women to claim their rights and benefit from empowerment initiatives, society will have to change the perception of them as helpless, vulnerable women in need of welfare and protection. Single women are strong women who survive and bring up their children in spite of the marginalisation that society inflicts on them and efforts must be made to ensure their full participation and inclusion in the society.

- 7.1. At the state and central levels, school curricula should be reviewed to ensure gender responsiveness aimed at reforming regressive gendered notions.
- 7.2. Special awareness and sensitisation programmes should be initiated to counter myths and cultural taboos associated with the status of single women. Measures should be taken to facilitate the empowerment of single women, and to remove the "pitiabile" and "helpless" stereotypes of them. These should be targeted at all major stakeholders, including family members, community members, government representatives and officials, as well as panchayats. Local theatre, radio, and other interesting media should be used to raise awareness and sensitisation on these issues.
- 7.3. All government training institutions should include courses to sensitise and motivate civil servants and other government officials

on gender issues. This will enable them to respond appropriately to gender-based violence and other gendered challenges created by socio-cultural norms, unequal economic development, climate change etc.

- 7.4. Awareness should be raised on the rights of those in live-in relationships. (Women in live-in relationships often face societal disapproval. Their rights regarding violence, settlement, alimony in case of separation, and custody of children from such unions are not adequately protected by law.)
- 7.5. Awareness programmes should to be undertaken for single women, including information on legal issues, their rights and entitlements and government schemes and the various provisions within them that are aimed at single women.

8. Social Security for Single Women from Marginalised Sections

Single women living in poverty, particularly those belonging to marginalised communities such as Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), Other Backward Classes (OBC), Muslims and sexual minorities, face heightened vulnerability to marginalisation and violence due to their marital status. Additionally, women engaged in precarious and hazardous work are also at increased risk of exploitation. Single women from marginalised communities, including unmarried, divorced, widowed or separated individuals, face unique challenges that hinder their financial stability and social well-being.

- 8.1. Pension should be provided for all single women who are BPL, which is at least half of the national minimum wage, with annual increments based on inflation rates. While some states offer pension schemes for single women, the amount provided varies greatly. For example, in Maharashtra, the pension amount for single women is a mere Rs. 600, which is insufficient to meet their needs.
- 8.2. Rehabilitation services should be provided in addition to pension support for destitute single women to address the broader challenges and vulnerabilities that they face in the society.

- 8.3. The eligibility criteria and documentation requirements for accessing pension schemes must be reformed to ensure that the most vulnerable women are not excluded. For example, in the Delhi CM scheme for widowed women, the requirement of five years' residence proof in Delhi poses barriers for those in rented or slum housing, as landlords do not allow them to use the rent address.
- 8.4. Children of single women from BPL families should be provided free education in school up to the age of 18 and scholarships should be made available to them for higher education.

9. Access to Healthcare Services

Single women often encounter significant barriers when attempting to access healthcare services. One prominent issue is the failure of relief packages and healthcare schemes established by the government to adequately reach single women. This lack of targeted support leaves many single women without access to healthcare.

- 9.1. Special provisions should be made to make free health services available for single women and their children. Financial assistance should be provided to single women for their medical treatment in critical illness such as cancer and HIV/AIDs.
- 9.2. A helpline should be set up to provide counselling and referral services for single women in need of support.
- 9.3. Special life insurance and health insurance schemes should be introduced for single women and their children up to the age of 21 years. Specific schemes for single mothers engaged in hazardous occupations should be introduced.

10. Provision of Homestead Land and Shelter

- 10.1. At least 15 cents of homestead land in rural areas should be allocated to single women from marginalised communities and steps should be taken to ensure that they can assume possession

of the land and that it is undisputed and clear of unauthorised encroachments.

- 10.2. Panchayat functionaries, particularly women representatives, should play an active role in enumeration and implementation of land distribution to single women. Women Self Help groups should be involved in all land and housing related identification and distribution.
- 10.3. Land allotment should be made in a convergent manner, including house-building assistance (for homestead land), electricity and water and sanitation facilities.
- 10.4. Decent and Affordable Housing
 - 10.4.1. Specialised social security schemes should be introduced to safeguard the property rights and protection of widows and deserted women, ensuring their financial security and well-being.
 - 10.4.2. Homeless single women should be prioritised under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana.
 - 10.4.3. Single women should be preferential beneficiaries for credit-linked subsidy schemes, including all categories of single women in the middle-income group and low-income group segments. They must also receive a higher interest subsidy and longer loan tenures for housing.
 - 10.4.4. Housing loans could be given with a “deferred repayment” policy so that single women can have their house without delay and repay later when they have saved money to repay.
 - 10.4.5. Single women often encounter stigma when seeking rental accommodation. Action should be taken against discriminatory practices by resident welfare associations (RWAs) and housing societies.
 - 10.4.6. Rotational housing provision should be implemented whereby single women are provided with a house or flat to reside in until their demise, after which the property is transferred to another single woman. In this way, no one

person gets the possession of the house which can provide a secure and safe shelter for a succession of single women to live with dignity.

10.4.7. Single women should be provided adequate and priority access to shelter, including homeless shelters, working women's hostels, rehabilitation homes for women suffering from addiction, mental illness, trafficking or 'destitution'.

10.4.8. Special provision should be made to establish adequate number of working women's hostels at the district level to create an enabling and conducive environment for working single women to attain economic independence. In each district, there should be at least one hostel with the capacity to shelter 100 single women.

11. Single Women in Vulnerable Situations

11.1 Migrant Workers

Although a majority of women migrate for marriage, single women without any source of earning and support also migrate to cities. A large proportion finds work in sectors such as domestic work, informal manufacturing and daily-wage work, rendering them vulnerable to exploitation and violence. They also face difficulties in accessing their socio-economic entitlements.

11.1.1 Migrant support services should be provided through special cells at migration facilitation centres or police stations for single women at source and destination points to ensure safe migration.

11.1.2 Access to all social security schemes should be maintained during migration.

11.1.3 Special efforts should be made to prevent school-going children of migrant laborers from entering the labour force. Educational facilities should be available and accessible in both government and private institutions in source and destination states. Setting up of mobile schools to be explored. Creche and day-care facilities should be ensured for children of single women while they work.

11.2. Agricultural Workers

Single women in the agricultural sector face numerous vulnerabilities due to systemic barriers and gender discrimination. Despite contributing significantly to agricultural production, many women are not officially recognised as farmers by the government, as they are labelled 'cultivators' rather than farmers since they do not own land. This distinction denies them access to crucial government schemes, institutional credit and subsidies meant for farmers, leaving them economically disadvantaged. Additionally, inheritance laws often discriminate against women, especially in states like Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir and Punjab, where daughters and sisters are denied the right to inherit agricultural land. Tragically, in cases of farmer suicides, widows inherit outstanding loans, worsening their financial burden.

11.2.1 Single women engaged in agriculture should be recognised as farmers and be entitled to all support given to farmers in terms of inputs, credit, market linkages, subsidies, income support, social security etc.

11.2.2 Demarcation of agricultural or homestead land to single women from marginalised communities must be prioritised and special care should be taken to ensure that the women are able to take possession of the land.

11.2.3 Gram sabhas should allocate all vacant/extra land in villages to landless single women for their livelihood security, allowing them to engage in farming, animal husbandry and other related activities.

11.3. Sex Workers

Single women lack the financial security and social support typically provided by a partner or family, rendering them particularly vulnerable to economic instability and exploitation. Additionally, societal stigma and legal marginalisation compound their challenges, making it difficult to access essential services, such as healthcare and legal protection.

11.3.1 Measures should be taken to end discrimination against sex workers in accessing public welfare services, including healthcare, education for children and job opportunities.

- 11.3.2 Government should allocate funds for the welfare of sex workers.
- 11.3.3 Scholarship for children's education: The welfare board should offer scholarships or financial assistance programs to support the education of children of sex workers.
- 11.3.4 Secure the right to health and education for all children: Children of sex-workers endure psychological trauma, harassment and discrimination, especially in schools.
- 11.3.5 Robust anti-bullying and anti-discrimination policies in schools must be established.
- 11.3.6 Accessible mental health services must be provided to support children coping with trauma and harassment.
- 11.3.7 Prevention of trafficking: Serious efforts should be made to prevent the trafficking of women and children into sex work.
- 11.3.8 Alternative employment opportunities: Programmes should be developed to provide alternative employment options for sex workers who wish to leave the profession. This could include vocational training, job placement assistance and support for entrepreneurship initiatives.

12. Witch Branding

The practice of witch branding can be traced across histories and geographies, where women and children, and in some cases even men, are branded, castigated or brutally killed. Data by the National Crime Records Bureau as reported in 'Witch Branding in India: A Study of Indigenous and Rural Societies' by ActionAid Association India indicates that 1,623 murders have been committed between 2009 and 2020 with the accusation of witchcraft. In cases of witch branding which do not end in murder, survivors are subjected to humiliation, torture, discrimination and abuse. These atrocities leave a lifelong impact on survivors and their families.

A combination of superstitious beliefs, religious practices, patriarchal and casteist norms are the broad reasons for witch branding. Dominant groups in rural areas use witch branding as a means to punish women who belong to marginalised sections of society for rejecting sexual

advances or speaking up against casteist and patriarchal practices, among other reasons. In many cases it is also used as a technique to deprive single women of property and land. Due to the mob lynching that communities resort to in cases of witch branding, accountability has been hard to uphold. Additionally, the lack of a robust national legal legislation and deep-rooted superstitious and patriarchal mindsets leads to the perpetuation of this human rights violation.

The eradication of witch branding requires a holistic approach. Along with punitive action and efficient implementation of the law, it is imperative to tackle the mindset which lead to the prevalence of this practice. A multipronged approach is required to prevent witch branding, rehabilitate the survivors and bring perpetrators to justice.

12.1. Legislative Action

- 12.1.1 The currently existing laws in 8 states do not uniformly address the issues of protection, prevention, rehabilitation and justice. Therefore, it is imperative to introduce national legislation that adequately deals with all 4 factors.
- 12.1.2 A high-powered district level committee should be constituted to assist state governments in the implementation of the act as well as the protection of victims. This committee should also act as a monitoring and vigilance committee and suggest effective measures to implement the provisions of the act.
- 12.1.3 The National Commission for Scheduled Castes and the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes, through their state channelising agencies, should be active members of this high-powered committee.
- 12.1.4 State governments should, on a quarterly basis, review the law-and-order situation, the functioning of different committees, the performance of public prosecutors, investigating officers and other officers responsible for implementing the provisions of different acts for combating the offences and the status of the cases registered under the act.

12.2 Institutional Mechanisms

- 12.2.1 State governments should facilitate the identification, mapping, review and declaration for districts which are prone to witch branding, on an annual basis. Past data should be used as an indicator to identify such districts where the human rights of vulnerable women are violated by declaring them witches.
- 12.2.2 District administrations and panchayats should identify vulnerable and single women who are marginalised for reasons of caste, tribe, marital status, access to property, mental health and ensure they have access to free and adequate health care, ration and economic opportunities.
- 12.2.3 State governments and the department of home affairs should order the district magistrate and the superintendent of police to visit on a quarterly basis to identified areas under their jurisdiction to review the law-and-order situation and meet the vulnerable and potential victims who face the threat of witch branding.

12.3 Protection Measures:

- 12.3.1 Whenever the district magistrate or the sub-divisional magistrate or any other executive magistrate or any police officer not below the rank of deputy superintendent of police receives information from any person or upon his/her own knowledge that an offence has been committed on the members of vulnerable communities, widows, elderly women/person, members of the scheduled castes or scheduled tribes communities within his/her jurisdiction, they should immediately visit the place of occurrence to assess the extent of crime, loss of life, loss and damage to property and submit a report forthwith to the state government.
- 12.3.2 The district magistrate or the sub-divisional magistrate or any other executive magistrate and the superintendent of police/deputy superintendent of police should order intensive police protection to the victim and the family, increase police patrolling in the area and take effective and

necessary steps to provide protection to the witnesses and other sympathisers of the victims.

- 12.3.3 The panchayats must be involved and should develop a graded community justice mechanism wherein they impose fines or imprison village members who brand any person as a witch. The punishment may be decided based on the severity of the act.
- 12.3.4 The panchayats and local police must initiate legal proceedings against any accuser.
- 12.3.5 The district administration should make provision for legal aid through public prosecutors.
- 12.3.6 The district administration should ensure deployment of special police force and provide sufficient protection in the identified area in case of occurrence or to be expected occurrence of offences against vulnerable persons or communities.
- 12.3.7 The state government should ensure that any offence of witch branding should be investigated by a police officer not below the rank of a deputy superintendent of police. The police should complete the investigation within thirty days and submit the report to the superintendent of police who in turn should immediately forward the report to the director general of police.
- 12.3.8 State governments and district administration should ensure training and sensitisation of the police forces in districts prone to witch branding. The police must ensure that relevant sections of the Indian Penal Code are applied in the FIR. The state specific act against witch branding should be applied jointly with the Prevention of Atrocities Act, 1989, wherever relevant.
- 12.3.9 The home secretary and the social welfare secretary to the state government, the director of prosecution, the officer in-charge of prosecution and the director general of police shall review by the end of every quarter the position of all investigations by the investigating officer in cases of offences of witch branding.

- 12.3.10 The governments of the states prone to witch branding should nominate nodal officers of the level of a secretary to the state government, for coordinating the functioning of the district magistrates and superintendent of police or other officers authorised by them, investigating officers and other officers responsible for implementing the provisions of the acts for stopping witch branding.
- 12.3.11 State governmentx should ensure legislative provision to provide travelling allowance, daily allowance, maintenance expenses and transport facilities to victims of witch branding or her dependants and witnesses.

12.4 Social Security Measures

- 12.4.1 District administration together with CSOs should undertake microfinance initiatives as well as adult literacy initiatives for vulnerable persons in identified areas.
- 12.4.2 Counselling services should be provided to persons who are branded as witches before and during the course of their reintroduction into mainstream society.
- 12.4.3 Central and state governments must ensure the provision of universal of social security, such as nutrition, health care, education as well employment generating activities.
- 12.4.4 For the promotion of women's rights, economic incentives such as zero-stamp duties in case of land and property transfers in women's names should be instituted.
- 12.4.5 State governments should make a provision for immediate compensation to any person who has been branded a witch.

12.5 Responsibility of State & Central Governments

- 12.5.1 States where witch branding is prevalent should prepare an act to comprehensively address this immediately with appropriate rules for implementation.
- 12.5.2 The central and state governments should make necessary provisions in their annual budgets for providing

relief and rehabilitation facilities to the victims of witch branding.

- 12.5.3 State governments should review, at least twice in a calendar year, the performance of the public prosecutor appointed and responsible in cases of witch branding, various reports received, investigations made and preventive steps taken by the district magistrate, sub-divisional magistrate and superintendent of police, relief and rehabilitation facilities provided to the victims and the reports in respect of lapses by the concerned officers.
- 12.5.4 State governments should prepare model action plans for implementing the provisions of the laws against witch branding. These should specify the roles and responsibilities of various departments and their officers at different levels, the roles and responsibilities of rural/urban local bodies and non-government organisations.
- 12.5.5 State governments should submit reports to the central government every year about the measures taken for implementing provisions of the different laws and various schemes/plans framed by them during the previous calendar year.
- 12.5.6 The central government should prepare national legislation and model rules under it for effective measures to protect victims from 'witch-hunting' and/or witch branding, and protect them from torture, oppression, humiliation and killing by prescribing and ensuring punishment for such offences as well as the relief and rehabilitation of victims of such offences.
- 12.5.7 The central government should undertake a national campaign to eliminate the practice of witch branding and hunting by sensitisation, awareness and education on the issue. This campaign should address the factors which lead to witch branding, such as caste, gender and tribe inequalities, land grabbing and fraudulent medical practitioners.

12.5.8 The National Commission for Scheduled Castes and the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes, through their state channelising agency, must work in conjunction with the state governments to develop and implement schemes for the economic and social upliftment of women belonging to disadvantaged caste groups and tribes.

12.6. Spreading Awareness Against Superstition and Witch Branding

12.6.1 District authorities and panchayats should set-up awareness centres for abolishing discrimination based on caste and gender. Myths and superstitions based on caste and gender should be tackled in these awareness centres.

12.6.2 State governments should conduct state-wide campaigns against fraudulent medical practices and self-proclaimed witch doctors.

12.6.3 Local and district administrations should conduct workshops in identified areas to educate and sensitise vulnerable persons about their rights, relevant state specific laws and provisions of central and state enactments or schemes.

12.6.4 State governments and district administrations should direct police to inspect clinics and practices of suspected fraudulent medical practitioners and witch doctors. If any medical practitioner is unable to prove themselves qualified, they should be fined and their practice shut down.

12.6.5 Civil society organisations, legal practitioners, women rights organisations and academics should be involved in raising awareness and the mobilisation of marginalised communities

12.6.6 State human rights commissions should undertake studies and recommend the necessary steps to be taken for effective implementation of all measures under relevant laws for the prevention of witch branding and the protection of victims.