

Addressing the plight of deserted women in India

Why in News?

The plight of deserted women in India has gained attention due to their exclusion from legal and welfare frameworks, highlighting the need for targeted policy interventions.

Who are deserted women?

- **Marriage** - It is the cornerstone of societal structure and is traditionally viewed as a fundamental institution, not only forming the bedrock of family life but also defining social roles and statuses.
- **Desertion** - It is the abandonment of a spouse without justifiable cause.
- **Deserted woman** - A woman whose husband has denied marital co-existence.

What are the challenges faced by deserted women?

- **Lack of a clear definition** - It leads to fundamental lacunae in India's gender-sensitive policymaking.
- **Judicial limbo** - Abandoned without the legal certainty of divorce, deserted women exist in a judicial and social limbo perpetuating their socio-economic and psychological marginalisation.
- **Paradoxical situation** - Divorced women have legal entitlements, and widows receive social and official acknowledgment and assistance.
- Deserted women, however, are caught in a paradoxical situation, ineligible for the benefits afforded to either group.
- **Systemic negligence** - While India's Draft National Policy for Women (2016) acknowledges the vulnerabilities of various categories of women, including divorced, separated, and widowed, it fails to adequately address the specific plight of deserted women.
- **Absence of data** - Despite the wealth of data on India's female population, the absence of reliable figures on deserted women renders policy responses speculative and ineffective.
- **Patriarchal society** - The onus of maintaining marital relationship falls heavily on women, making them particularly vulnerable to the fallout of marital discord.
- **Social isolation** - The stigma of being deserted, coupled with familial and community rejection, leads to social isolation and hinders their reintegration into society.
- In rural areas, where patriarchal norms are deeply entrenched, these challenges are compounded by factors such as caste, religion, and geographic location.
- **Economic challenges** - They struggle to achieve financial stability and financial independence, due to *lack of access to property rights and credit*, further deepening their financial insecurity.

- **Limited employment opportunities** - Limited skills and education, rigid social norms force them into poorly paid or irregular jobs.
- **Psychological challenge** - The impact of desertion is devastating and these women endure severe emotional trauma, characterised by low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression.

What are the measures available to support deserted women?

- **Swadhar Greh Scheme** - It provides temporary shelter, food, and medical care for women in distress, including deserted women.
- **One Stop Centre Scheme (Sakhi Centers)** - It provides medical, psychological, and legal assistance to women facing distress.
- **Working Women's Hostel** - It Provides subsidized accommodation to women, including deserted women, to help them find employment and financial independence.
- **Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee (MGNREGA)** - It guarantees 100 days of wage employment per year for rural workers, including deserted women.
- Single women, including deserted women, get priority job allocation under the scheme.
- **Women Helpline 181 (WHL)** - It provides 24 hours emergency and non-emergency response to women affected by violence, both in public and private spaces.
- **Mahila Shakti Kendra** - It aims to empower rural women through community participation and to create an environment in which they realize their full potential.
- **Nari Arthik Sashaktikaran Yojana** - It supports Scheduled Castes, Single Women/Widows to take up income generating activities.
- **National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM)** - It encourages women, including deserted women to form Self-Help Groups (SHGs) for financial independence .
- **State government schemes** - "Destitute/Deserted Wives Pension Scheme" scheme by Tamil Nadu and "Pension for Women in Distress" under "Integrated Social Security Scheme (IGSSS)" by Jammu and Kashmir provides social security to deserted women.

What are the challenges in implementing the welfare programs for deserted women?

- **Absence of formal recognition** - While some States have categorized deserted women, a lack of uniformity at the Central level hinders their formal recognition as eligible beneficiaries.
- **Inadequate targeted welfare programs** - The lack of targeted State welfare measures further exacerbates the plight of deserted women.
- **Stringent criteria for social welfare benefits** - Requirements such as residency criteria , create barriers for women who have migrated in search of sustenance.
- **Budgetary constraints** - Even well-intentioned schemes such as the Swadhar Greh Scheme often fail to deliver tangible benefits owing to budgetary constraints and implementation challenges.
- **Lack of Awareness** - Many deserted women do not know about their legal rights and available schemes.

What can be done?

- The plight of deserted women underscores the need for a more inclusive approach to women's empowerment.
- Discrepancies faced by deserted women necessitates a re-evaluation of gendered hierarchies and a more nuanced approach to gender-sensitive policymaking.
- A multi-pronged strategy encompassing legal reform, policy innovation, and grassroots advocacy is essential.
- Integrating deserted women into State welfare measures and expanding empowerment initiatives through self-help groups (SHGs) are crucial steps.
- Deserted women can be recognized as a separate category in all welfare and empowerment schemes such as NSAP pension, PM Awas yojana, employment, entrepreneurship and credit.
- Improving legal literacy through dedicated legal support centers is equally essential.
- Community support networks and free counseling are needed to address their psychological needs.
- Expanded access to healthcare and insurance coverage will provide a safety net against economic- and social instability.
- A formal national institution dedicated to the care of deserted women would ensure uniform policy implementation and recognition of their specific needs.
- Legal reforms are necessary to expedite processes and remove administrative barriers.

References

1. [The Hindu | The invisible struggle](#)
2. [PIB | Scheme For Destitute Women](#)