

Supreme Court rues lack of interest in welfare measures for widows

Centuries after great reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy sought to give widows respect and dignity, nothing much seems to have changed for women who are condemned to the margins following the death of their husbands. This seems to have prompted the Supreme Court to recently castigate the central government and the states for not taking adequate steps for the welfare and rehabilitation of destitute widows. Referring to reports by the National Legal Services Authority and the National Commission for Women (NCW) on the condition of shelter homes for widows abandoned by their family members in Vrindavan, a bench comprising Justices Madan B Lokur and Deepak Gupta said social security measures supposed to be implemented by the Centre and the states had proved ineffectual. One of the reports had said that besides inadequate water and electricity facilities, the shelter homes had poor hygiene standards, even lacked proper toilets.

According to the 2011 Census, there are more than 56 million widows in the country. Along with China (with more than 50 million widows), India accounts for a third of the global population of women who've lost their husbands. Other than in the educated upper classes, social prejudices prevent most widows from remarrying or asserting their financial independence. Neglected by society and abandoned by their families, many of them end up seeking refuge in homes and ashrams at Mathura and Vrindavan in Uttar Pradesh. In a report filed in the apex court, the NCW had recommended making children responsible by law for looking after their widowed mothers under the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007. The NCW report said an estimated 5,000-10,000 widows had sought shelter in ashrams at Mathura and Vrindavan. A majority of the 1,000-odd widows interviewed in Vrindavan by the NCW had been abandoned by their families.

The Hindu Succession Act 1969 provides ownership of property through inheritance to widows but this has remained largely on paper. Under the Centre's National Social Assistance Programme, widows aged between 40 and 64 are to be given Rs 600 as pension every month. Last year the Delhi government decided to raise the pension for widows to Rs 1,000. These amounts are grossly inadequate. The widows remain trapped in a cycle of social marginalisation and economic deprivation. Instead of giving them small amounts of money, the State should help widows acquire skills that will help them find gainful employment. This will ensure that India's widows transform from being an invisible minority to productive participants in the country's growth story.

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