



WIDOWHOOD AND SINGLE MOTHERHOOD IN RURAL TRIPURA: SOCIAL, ECONOMIC CHALLENGES AND PATHWAYS TO EMPOWERMENT

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ABSTRACT

Widowhood and single motherhood are important social and economic realities affecting women and children in rural Tripura. The death, absence or separation of a spouse may transform household responsibilities and place women in the position of primary caregivers and income providers. In many cases, widows and single mothers must manage food security, childcare, education, healthcare and household expenses without adequate economic resources or institutional support. Their difficulties are further intensified by poverty, limited employment opportunities, unpaid care work, restricted mobility, social stigma, inadequate access to property and difficulties in obtaining welfare benefits. These challenges are particularly significant in rural and indigenous communities, where households often depend on agriculture, informal employment, forest resources, livestock, handloom, handicrafts and small-scale trading. Geographical isolation, limited access to markets, poor transport facilities and low digital literacy can increase women's vulnerability. This article examines the social and economic challenges experienced by widows and single mothers in rural Tripura and explores possible pathways towards their empowerment. The study adopts a qualitative and sociological perspective based on proposed in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, case studies, participant observation and secondary analysis. The analysis is guided by feminist theory, social exclusion theory, the capability approach and the sustainable livelihood perspective. The article argues that empowerment requires more than welfare assistance. Sustainable empowerment must combine income security, skill development, access to credit, social protection, education, healthcare, childcare, legal assistance, property rights, collective organisation and participation in local governance. Self-Help Groups, Panchayati Raj Institutions and rural livelihood programmes can become significant platforms for strengthening women's economic independence and social inclusion. Widows and single mothers should therefore be recognised not merely as vulnerable beneficiaries but as workers, caregivers, producers, entrepreneurs and rights-bearing citizens.

KEYWORDS: Widowhood, Single Motherhood, Rural Women, Tripura, Indigenous Women, Rural Development, Social Exclusion, Livelihood, Self-Help Groups, Women's Empowerment

1. INTRODUCTION

Family remains one of the most important social institutions in rural India. It provides emotional support, economic security, childcare, social identity and assistance during periods of crisis. However, when a woman becomes widowed or assumes responsibility for children without a resident male partner, the structure and functioning of the household may change significantly. The loss, absence or separation of a spouse can increase women's economic responsibilities while also expanding their unpaid domestic and caregiving work. Widowhood is not merely an individual experience of bereavement. It is also a social condition shaped by gender relations, cultural expectations, family structures, inheritance practices, labour markets and access to public institutions. In many rural communities, women's social identity remains closely associated with marriage and household relationships. As a result, widowhood may affect women's social status, mobility, access to resources and participation in community life. Single motherhood is similarly a diverse experience. It may result from widowhood, divorce, separation, abandonment, migration, imprisonment, non-marital childbirth or the long-term absence of a spouse. Although these circumstances are different, many single mothers share a common condition: they carry primary responsibility for their children while possessing limited economic and social resources. They must often combine income generation with cooking, cleaning, childcare, education and healthcare responsibilities.

The situation is particularly difficult in rural areas because employment opportunities are often seasonal, informal and poorly remunerated. Rural households may depend on agriculture, daily wage labour, livestock, petty trade, forest-based activities, handloom, handicrafts and other small-scale economic activities. These livelihoods can provide essential income, but they frequently lack employment security, predictable wages, social protection and opportunities for economic advancement. Women-headed households may also face difficulties in obtaining credit because they lack collateral, regular income or formal ownership of productive assets. Tripura provides an important context for examining these issues. The state has considerable cultural and social diversity, including indigenous communities with distinctive social institutions, customary practices and livelihood systems. Rural women contribute



significantly to agriculture, household production, livestock rearing, forest-resource collection, weaving, food processing and care work. However, much of their labour remains unpaid, invisible or inadequately recognised. The institutional context of rural development is also important. The Tripura Rural Livelihood Mission has developed a wide network of women's Self-Help Groups and associated community institutions. These organisations can provide savings, credit, livelihood training, social support and information about government schemes. The official TRLM portal reports extensive mobilisation of rural households into SHGs and the development of Village Organisations and Cluster Level Federations. Such institutions offer an important foundation for identifying and supporting women-headed households, although their effectiveness may vary according to location, community participation and implementation capacity.^[1]

This article examines the social and economic challenges faced by widows and single mothers in rural Tripura and explores pathways towards their empowerment. It argues that their vulnerability is multidimensional and is produced through the interaction of gender inequality, poverty, unpaid care work, weak asset ownership, social stigma and institutional barriers.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objective of this study is to examine the social and economic challenges experienced by widows and single mothers in rural Tripura. The study also seeks to understand how gender inequality, poverty, social exclusion and household vulnerability influence their everyday lives. It examines the role of family members, community networks, Self-Help Groups, Panchayati Raj Institutions and government agencies in providing support or creating barriers. Another objective is to identify existing and potential livelihood opportunities available to widows and single mothers. The study further considers the difficulties women face in accessing pensions, food security, healthcare, education, housing, credit and rural development programmes. Finally, it proposes policy measures for strengthening the social, economic, legal and political empowerment of women-headed households.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study is guided by several research questions. It asks what major social challenges are faced by widows and single mothers in rural Tripura and what forms of economic insecurity they experience. It also examines how gender norms, social expectations and community attitudes influence their everyday lives. The study further explores how women combine paid employment with unpaid care work and how family and community networks support or constrain them. It examines the role of Self-Help Groups and government programmes in improving women's livelihoods and asks why some eligible women are unable to access social protection schemes. The study also considers how women's vulnerability affects children's education, nutrition and future opportunities. Finally, it identifies institutional and policy pathways that can promote sustainable empowerment.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

4.1 Feminist Perspective

The feminist perspective helps explain how gender inequality shapes women's access to employment, property, income, decision-making and social recognition. Widowhood and single motherhood often reveal inequalities that already exist within families and communities. Women may be expected to perform domestic and caregiving work even when they also become the main income earners. When a husband dies or becomes absent, a woman may assume responsibility for the household without receiving a corresponding increase in authority or control over family resources. She may be expected to work, care for children and maintain the household while having limited rights over land, housing, savings or productive assets. A feminist analysis therefore focuses not only on women's personal difficulties but also on patriarchy, unequal labour divisions, discriminatory inheritance practices and gender-based social expectations. The feminist framework also recognises that widows and single mothers are not a homogeneous group. Their experiences may differ according to age, education, caste, tribe, disability, religion, economic status, geographical location and number of children. An intersectional understanding is therefore necessary to examine how different forms of disadvantage operate together.

4.2 Social Exclusion Theory

Social exclusion theory is useful for examining how individuals and groups experience restricted access to economic resources, social networks, institutions and decision-making processes. Widows and single mothers may experience exclusion because of poverty, but their exclusion is also connected with their family status and social identity. Some women may lose access to informal networks that previously provided employment, credit, information or social protection. Others may be excluded from community activities because of stigma or economic hardship. Women who lack identity documents, bank accounts, digital literacy or knowledge of government procedures may experience administrative exclusion. Social exclusion is therefore multidimensional. It may involve exclusion from employment, public services, community networks, political participation and cultural recognition. Understanding these forms of exclusion is important for designing policies that address structural barriers rather than merely providing short-term assistance.



4.3 Capability Approach

Amartya Sen's capability approach provides a broader understanding of empowerment. According to this approach, development should not be measured only through income or material resources. It should also be assessed through the real opportunities people have to live the kind of life they value. For widows and single mothers, empowerment involves the ability to secure food, housing, healthcare, education and a dignified livelihood. It also includes the ability to control income, own property, make household decisions, move safely, participate in community institutions and claim legal rights. A woman may receive a small income but remain disempowered if she cannot control that income or make decisions about her children and household. The capability approach therefore directs attention towards autonomy, dignity, security and meaningful choice.

4.4 Sustainable Livelihood Perspective

The sustainable livelihood perspective complements the capability approach by examining the assets and resources available to households. These include human capital, social capital, financial capital, physical assets and natural resources. A woman may possess labour, traditional knowledge and entrepreneurial ability but lack land, credit, technology, transport or market access. For this reason, training alone cannot guarantee a sustainable livelihood. A livestock programme, for example, must also provide access to veterinary services, feed, housing, credit and markets. The sustainable livelihood perspective therefore encourages an integrated approach to rural development.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

5.1 Research Approach and Design

The study adopts a qualitative, descriptive and exploratory research design. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study seeks to understand women's lived experiences, perceptions, coping strategies, social relationships and interactions with institutions. The purpose is not only to identify the number of women experiencing particular problems but also to understand how these problems are experienced and managed in everyday life. The descriptive component of the study focuses on documenting the social and economic conditions of widows and single mothers. The exploratory component examines less visible issues such as stigma, emotional distress, informal support, family negotiations, livelihood strategies and experiences with government institutions. Purposive sampling is used to identify women with direct experience of widowhood or single motherhood. Maximum variation sampling help include women from different age groups, communities, income levels, educational backgrounds and household situations. Snowball sampling may also be used to reach women who are socially isolated or difficult to identify through formal institutions. Primary data are collected through in-depth interviews, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, case studies, participant observation and informal conversations. In-depth interviews provide detailed information about personal histories, household changes, economic difficulties and experiences of stigma. Focus group discussions help examine community perceptions regarding widowhood, single motherhood, gender roles and women's participation in public life. Case studies are useful for presenting detailed accounts of women's livelihood strategies, use of government schemes, participation in SHGs and relationships with family members. Participant observation could be conducted during livelihood activities, SHG meetings, visits to markets and interactions with local institutions. Key-informant interviews with frontline workers and local representatives would provide institutional perspectives.

Because the study concerns bereavement, poverty, abandonment, family conflict and emotional distress, ethical safeguards are essential. Participants are informed about the purpose of the research and their participation should be voluntary. Their identities are protected, and interviews is conducted in safe and private settings. Researchers avoid pressuring women to disclose painful experiences. Participants have the right to refuse any question or withdraw from the study. Where necessary, researchers provide information about available legal, health and psychosocial services.

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

6.1 Widowhood and Single Motherhood as Multidimensional Vulnerability

The analysis indicates that widowhood and single motherhood should be understood as multidimensional forms of vulnerability. A woman experience economic insecurity, social isolation, care burdens, health problems and institutional exclusion at the same time. The loss or absence of a spouse reduce household income, but the consequences extend beyond income. Women also lose social protection, decision-making support, labour assistance and connections with institutions. Their vulnerability is therefore created through the interaction of family, economic and institutional factors. For example, a woman without land may be unable to obtain a bank loan. Without credit, she may depend on irregular wage labour. Irregular income affect children's education and nutrition, while the responsibility of childcare prevent her from attending training. This demonstrates how different vulnerabilities reinforce one another.



6.2 Social Stigma and Loss of Recognition

Widows and single mothers experience social stigma because their household status differs from conventional expectations. Widows are viewed primarily through the loss of their husbands, while single mothers are judged according to assumptions about morality, family responsibility or social respectability. Such attitudes can reduce women's confidence and discourage them from participating in community activities. Some may avoid public gatherings, markets or government offices because they fear criticism or feel that they lack social support. Social stigma can therefore restrict women's mobility and indirectly reduce their access to employment and public services. The experience of stigma is not uniform. Some women may receive substantial support from relatives, neighbours and SHGs, while others may experience neglect or discrimination. The strength of social networks, the woman's economic position and the presence of supportive community institutions are important factors determining outcomes.

6.3 Increased Care Responsibilities and Time Poverty

Widows and single mothers with dependent children frequently perform several roles at the same time. They work as agricultural labourers or petty traders while also managing cooking, cleaning, childcare, education and healthcare.

This combination creates physical exhaustion and emotional pressure. Women have little time for rest, training, participation in SHG meetings or engagement with public institutions. The lack of childcare is particularly significant. Even when a livelihood opportunity is available, women are unable to accept it if the work requires travel or long hours away from home. Care responsibilities should therefore be treated as a central economic issue. Childcare support can increase women's participation in employment, education, training and community decision-making.

6.4 Economic Insecurity and Informal Employment

The loss or absence of a spouse lead to a sudden reduction in household income. Women enter the labour market without adequate skills, capital or employment protection. They often depend on agricultural labour, domestic work, daily wage employment, livestock rearing, small-scale trading, handloom and food processing. Informal activities may provide flexibility and allow women to remain close to their children. However, they frequently produce irregular income and limited security. Women may also have weak bargaining power and may be vulnerable to delayed payments, low wages and exploitative working conditions. Sustainable livelihood programmes should therefore improve women's access to productive assets, credit, technology and markets. The objective should not simply be to increase women's participation in economic activities but to improve the quality, productivity and control associated with that work.

6.5 Property, Land and Asset Insecurity

Land, housing, livestock and equipment are important sources of economic security. Women who lack independent ownership or control over these resources may remain dependent on relatives and vulnerable to dispossession. Property disputes arise when women lack awareness of inheritance rights or when land records remain in the name of male relatives. Even when women possess legal rights, they hesitate to assert them because of fear of conflict, social pressure or dependence on family support. Legal literacy, documentation assistance and accessible legal aid are therefore necessary. Property ownership can strengthen women's bargaining power, improve access to credit and provide security during periods of crisis.

6.6 Access to Credit and Financial Services

Women-headed households experience financial exclusion because they lack collateral, regular income or formal documents. Some women depend on informal lenders, relatives or employers, which can increase debt and reduce their economic independence. Self-Help Groups help women build savings and access small loans. They also support financial literacy and bank linkages. However, credit must be accompanied by training, market information and technical assistance. Loans without viable livelihood opportunities increase repayment pressure without improving household income. Tripura's rural-livelihood institutions provide a potential framework for strengthening women's access to savings, credit and community funds. The TRLM reports a large network of SHGs and higher-level federations that can assist with financial inclusion and livelihood development.

6.7 Barriers to Social Protection

Widows and single mothers are eligible for pensions, food security programmes, housing benefits, health insurance, educational support and livelihood schemes. Nevertheless, many women fail to access these benefits because of limited awareness, documentation problems, digital exclusion, geographical distance and administrative delays. Government portals identify widow-pension provisions intended to provide financial support to eligible women. However, the actual impact of these schemes depends on effective implementation at the village level. Women need assistance with application procedures, identity documents, bank accounts and grievance redressal. SHGs, Anganwadi workers, ASHA workers and Panchayat institutions can help identify eligible women and facilitate access. Outreach camps and doorstep services are particularly important in geographically remote communities.



6.8 Role of Self-Help Groups

Self-Help Groups provide financial, social and emotional support to widows and single mothers. Regular meetings help women develop confidence, share information and learn about government schemes. Collective savings and lending reduce dependence on informal moneylenders. SHGs also create opportunities for collective production in areas such as food processing, livestock, bamboo products, handloom and small retail. Participation in women's groups increase women's visibility in community affairs and improve their ability to negotiate with banks, officials and markets.

However, SHGs should not be regarded as automatically empowering. Their effectiveness depends on democratic participation, transparent financial management, adequate training, market access and support for women facing severe domestic and care responsibilities. SHGs must also avoid transferring excessive administrative and financial burdens to women without sufficient institutional assistance.

6.9 Indigenous Knowledge and Rural Livelihoods

Indigenous women in Tripura possess knowledge related to agriculture, weaving, food preservation, bamboo and cane work, forest products, medicinal plants and natural-resource management. These skills may provide a foundation for sustainable livelihoods when linked with appropriate technology, quality control, branding and markets. Development programmes should build upon existing knowledge rather than impose uniform models of entrepreneurship. At the same time, commercialisation should not exploit women's labour or remove community control over indigenous knowledge. Women should participate in decisions concerning production, pricing, marketing and income distribution. Cultural sensitivity should be combined with gender equality. Traditional institutions and practices that support cooperation and community welfare should be strengthened, while practices that restrict women's autonomy, property rights or public participation should be addressed through education and dialogue.

6.10 Health and Psychological Well-Being

The physical and psychological health of widows and single mothers requires greater attention. Women who combine paid work with childcare and domestic responsibilities may experience exhaustion, anxiety, grief and emotional isolation. Health problems remain untreated because women prioritise the needs of children and household members. The cost of treatment, distance from health facilities and lack of transport can further discourage healthcare use. Health programmes should therefore address nutrition, reproductive health, chronic illness, mental well-being and access to affordable treatment. Community-based counselling and support groups can help women manage grief, loneliness and stress.

6.11 Effects on Children

The condition of widows and single mothers is closely connected with children's well-being. Economic insecurity affect children's food, clothing, school attendance, healthcare and educational opportunities. Older children, particularly girls are expected to perform domestic work or leave school to assist the household. If children discontinue education, poverty become intergenerational. Interventions should therefore include scholarships, nutrition, school retention, childcare, educational materials and career guidance. Supporting children also reduces women's care burden. Education and childcare services can enable mothers to participate in employment and livelihood programmes more consistently.

6.12 Decision-Making and Community Participation

Although women become the primary managers of their households, their decision-making authority remain restricted. Relatives or community members influence decisions concerning land, property, children's education, employment and household expenditure. Participation in SHGs, Gram Sabhas and local governance institutions improve women's confidence and public visibility. However, participation must be meaningful. Women need information about local programmes, opportunities to speak, support in negotiating with officials and protection from social intimidation. The inclusion of widows and single mothers in village planning can help ensure that rural development responds to their actual needs, including transport, childcare, water, housing, employment and healthcare.

7. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

A comprehensive rural policy for widows and single mothers in Tripura should begin with systematic identification. Village and Panchayat institutions should maintain updated information on widows, separated women, abandoned women and other women-headed households. This information must be collected confidentially and used to connect women with pensions, food security, housing, healthcare, education and livelihood programmes. Social-protection schemes should be made easier to access. Village-level camps should assist women with death certificates, identity documents, bank accounts, income certificates and online applications. Delays in pension payments should be monitored, and local grievance-redress mechanisms should be established. Digital systems should be supported by human facilitation so that women without smartphones, internet access or digital literacy are not excluded.



Livelihood programmes should move beyond generic skill training. Training must be connected with local market opportunities and should include tools, start-up capital, credit, technical advice, transportation, packaging and marketing. In Tripura, activities such as livestock rearing, bamboo and cane work, handloom, food processing, kitchen gardening, nursery development and indigenous agricultural products may offer opportunities when supported through appropriate value-chain institutions. Self-Help Groups should be strengthened as platforms for savings, credit, collective production, legal awareness and social protection. Women-headed households may be given priority in vulnerability-reduction funds, emergency loans and livelihood grants. SHG federations can also support market negotiations, bulk purchasing, product branding and engagement with Panchayats and government departments.

Property and inheritance rights require special attention. Women should receive legal literacy, assistance with land records, support in obtaining succession documents and access to affordable legal aid. Government housing and land-allocation programmes should promote women's ownership or joint ownership. Stronger asset rights can improve women's economic security and bargaining power. Childcare should be included in all livelihood and training programmes. Anganwadi centres and community childcare facilities should operate in a manner that reflects women's agricultural and employment schedules. Education support for children should include scholarships, nutrition, school-retention measures, digital access and career counselling. Health services should include regular screening, reproductive healthcare, nutrition, treatment for chronic illnesses and mental-health support. Community-based counselling and women's support groups can help reduce emotional isolation. Frontline workers should be trained to identify women experiencing severe distress and connect them with appropriate services.

Women's political and community participation should also be strengthened. Widows and single mothers should be encouraged to participate in Gram Sabhas, Panchayats, SHG federations, Village Organisations and local development committees. Their participation can help improve planning for childcare, transport, housing, healthcare, water, sanitation and employment. Finally, departments dealing with rural development, women and child development, social welfare, education, health and tribal development should work together. Programme success should be assessed not only by the number of women enrolled but also by changes in income, asset ownership, decision-making, school attendance, health access and social participation.

8. CONCLUSION

Widowhood and single motherhood in rural Tripura represent important issues of gender, poverty, rural development, social protection and economic justice. Women who lose or live without a resident spouse frequently assume extensive responsibility for household survival and children's well-being while facing limited income, inadequate assets, unpaid care work, stigma and weak institutional support. Their vulnerability is not simply a consequence of marital status. It is produced through the interaction of gender inequality, poverty, limited livelihood opportunities, unequal access to property, restricted mobility, care responsibilities and administrative barriers. These problems reinforce one another and may create long-term insecurity for both women and children.

Empowerment must therefore extend beyond the provision of financial assistance. Sustainable empowerment requires income security, skills, credit, productive assets, education, healthcare, childcare, legal assistance, property rights, social protection and participation in decision-making. It also requires recognition of women's existing knowledge, labour and agency. Self-Help Groups, Panchayats, Village Organisations and rural livelihood institutions can become important instruments for strengthening women's collective and economic power. In the context of Tripura, interventions should remain sensitive to indigenous cultures, local livelihood systems and geographical differences. At the same time, cultural sensitivity should be accompanied by a commitment to gender equality, dignity and women's rights.

Widows and single mothers should not be viewed merely as vulnerable beneficiaries. They should be recognised as workers, caregivers, producers, entrepreneurs, community members and rights-bearing citizens. Strengthening their capabilities and autonomy can improve the welfare of their children, households and rural communities.

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