

## **Single Women Recreating Family: An Exploration of the Role of the Collective in Empowering Women**

Anurita Jalan\*

Department of Sociology, Maitreyi College, University of Delhi, Delhi, India

\*Correspondence: [ajalan@maitreyi.du.ac.in](mailto:ajalan@maitreyi.du.ac.in)

### **ABSTRACT**

A study of single women; separated, divorced or deserted by their husbands, mostly mothers, belonging to the economically weaker sections of the society was conducted in states of North India. The women, under study, are members of non-government organisations working for rights of single women. The primary aim of this study is to analyse how women from the economically weaker sections of society rebuild their lives after their marriage breaks down, and to understand how they create new relations, and the meaning they assign to family. The focus is to understand the challenges faced by women post marital discord and whether being a part of the organisation empowers them through collective struggle. The data was collected using the methodologies of semi-structured interviews and informal conversations using their life narratives. Depending on the comfort of the respondents, their life stories are recorded or notes have been taken. The method of the narratives is used to encompass the stories of the individuals through their experiences. It was found that single women were forced into poverty as a direct consequence of their marital breakdown, and the women becoming 'single'. They seldom find support from the natal family, any kind of state support or an income they can depend upon.<sup>1</sup> Having become a part of the organisation, these women seek to redress their rights collectively, and motivate other women in similar situations to join the social movement. Single women, not related by kinship, form a 'sisterhood,' sharing a relationship of mutual interdependence and respect. Some single women have created women-centric families with fluid boundaries. The agency accorded to them through the strength of the collective, enables them to get rid of their stigmatised identities of 'vulnerable' and from 'broken homes' and empowers them to challenge patriarchal structures. The study concludes that 'single women,' as a collective, are giving a new meaning to relationships and family, as they carve a new identity for themselves, which is not subsumed within the structure of a patriarchal family. Rethinking the family from the point of single women provides a new vantage point in the critical analysis of the family and opens possibilities of forging other family forms and relationships outside the mainstream, thus expanding the sociological theorisation of the family.

**Keywords:** Collective support, deserted, non-government organisation, recreating family, single women, sisterhood

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<sup>1</sup> The terms single mothers/women are used interchangeably to stress upon the identity in a particular context.

## INTRODUCTION

Within the conventional Indian families of North India, patriarchy provides the overarching normative structure and marriage is the legally sanctioned relationship for the heterosexual couple around which families form. The institution of marriage continues to occupy an important place in the Indian context. Many aspects of marriage have changed over time, e.g., the age at marriage and the mode of spouse selection, but these are usually found in urban areas (Kaur & Palriwala, 2014). Whether these changes are a result of individualisation in a globalised world or due to other related factors, the stability of the institution remains intact. In this context, customs, family prestige and honour have played a role in ensuring that conventional norms prevail. Women are considered destined for marriage and family. Given the significance attached to the institutions of marriage and family, a stigma gets attached to women who find themselves at the periphery of these institutions. While women in general are discriminated against, women who are single face double discrimination by virtue of the absence of a male figure, setting into motion anxieties of control (Menon, 2012).<sup>2</sup> Her singleness becomes her primary attribute. Studies, though limited, have looked at the ways in which single women cope with their lives within the family (Rathaur, 1990; Jethani, 1994; Vardhan, 2008). In these studies, the single unmarried woman figures within a general category of single women. Since marriage remains the legitimate hetero-normative relationship, a basic distinction exists between those who remain single and those who are married. Women who experience a marital breakdown seldom have the support of the natal family or an income they can depend on. There are no state welfare policies specifically dedicated to single mothers who are bringing up their children without their spouse. The stories of their lives are of bare survival, of having traversed a journey fraught with struggles. Many negative terms like ‘cast away’ women, ‘thrown away’ women are used for women who are either forced out of home and marriage, or choose to leave on their own (Kulkarni & Bhatt, 2010). The experience of single mothers shows the need for social intervention to ensure that they have basic rights and social support (Mehrotra, 2003). The focus of this article is on single mothers who are dealing with issues of survival and struggling to build a life of dignity as a collective. NGOs for single women are consistently battling against socio-cultural discriminations against single women.<sup>3</sup> The NGO, *Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan*, (ENSS) identifies single women and mobilises them so that they can get their due rights in the society. It is with the support of this collective that they are able to develop strategies for coping with the situation. Women facing economic deprivation due to their single status experience a change after having become a part of the collective movement. The organisation empowers women, creating a sisterhood giving a new meaning to relationships.

This organisation is run by women who are rendered single due to different reasons, irrespective of their economic conditions, caste or religious backgrounds, different generation and educational backgrounds. Some of the women have been associated with the NGO for several years and are its active members. They support new members by providing emotional and financial support. Most of the *Ekal Naris* (“women alone” - as they refer to themselves and the other members) were married at a young age and often forced to drop out of school. Women, mostly deserted by the husband, in the initial years of their struggle, tend to oscillate between the marital family and natal family. After becoming members of the organisation, they are able to redefine their image from being women, who are defined only in reference to male members of the family. Awareness about the rights of women is generated by the NGO so that women can build their capacities, and thereby self-confidence. The NGO arranges for the women to be taught tertiary skills, so they can become financially independent. The present study attempts to analyse their strategies of survival, the complexity of their lives and

<sup>2</sup> Women who experience a marital break are perceived as a threat to other marriages as a result of lack of male control over their sexuality.

<sup>3</sup> The research was done as a part of my doctoral thesis: *Rethinking Family-A Study of Lone Parent Families in an Urban Setting* (2018).

the diverse contexts in which they negotiate their identities as single women, with or without the support of their own kin, and with the support of other women in similar circumstances.

## METHODOLOGY

The fieldwork was conducted amongst single mothers who are members of various NGOs. A three day meeting of an NGO, *Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan* (the translation provided by the office bearers was 'association of strong woman alone') for single women from various states of India was held in Delhi.<sup>4</sup> Approximately one hundred single women attended the meeting. On attending the meeting, it was learnt that only single women can become members of the organisation after paying a nominal fee, which the organisation pays on their behalf, if they are unable to do so, on their own. While all single women - unmarried, deserted, separated, divorced or widows - fall under the rubric of the *ekal nari*, this study focuses only on the narratives of single mothers. The three day meeting provided the opportunity to interact with office bearers of the organisation, all single women, working relentlessly for the cause of the *ekal naris*. In-depth interviews, along with focused group discussions were held with long term members along with new members of the organisation. Only women from the northern and central regions of India are a part of the study, as patterns of marriage and kinship tend to differ in other regions. The members are largely from the states of Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh and Bihar. Although the women are from different states, castes and religious backgrounds, the common thread that binds them is that they are all single due to separation, divorce or desertion.

A sister organisation of ENSS, called Sutra, is in the Solan district of Himachal Pradesh. They hold monthly meetings where single women discuss problems and related interventions. I met the office bearers of this organisation in Dharampur, Himachal Pradesh and attended their meetings. One of the office bearers of Sutra who is referred to as *behenji* (elder sister or can be used as a term of respect for a woman) was my key informant and explained the purpose of my visit to the women who had assembled there for a meeting from the adjoining areas. The meeting was attended by fifty women approximately, all from the economically weaker sections of society. The *behenji* informed me that the women were mostly deserted by their husbands and that legal divorces were very rare in the countryside. The meetings were held in the vicinity of their residential spaces so that the women would not have to travel. This was done in order to ensure maximum participation in the meetings. The *behenji* explained that since the women had to initially approach the organisation rather than the organisation going to the women, it was viable to hold meetings in various local areas. The meetings were held in common spaces, like an *anganwadi* (rural mother and child care centres established by the government). Observing and interviewing women in the setting of their everyday habitat added to the understanding of their situation and helped build better rapport with them. Non-participant observation as an empirical tool was then combined with in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The duration of the field work was approximately one week.

Notes were taken when women narrated their experiences during the meetings. In-depth interviews were held both with office bearers and the other members and often spilled over to informal discussions during breaks and home visits. In order to allow the free flow of their narrative, no interruptions were made, although sometimes brief interventions had to be made to prompt them to discuss their lives post the separation.

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<sup>4</sup> Although the respondents did not especially ask for their identity to be hidden, pseudonyms are used to protect their own and their family members' right to privacy. Sometimes information was withdrawn on the request of the respondent if it had been revealed in the flow of conversation and later asked for it to be withdrawn for various reasons.

As compared to the women interviewed in Dharampur, the women in Delhi discussed their private lives with ease as they had already shared their life histories in the various meetings of the NGO and international forums. There were many discussions with women around ‘cases’ for various aspects of marriage especially with reference to the Domestic Violence Act (2005), government schemes etc. Sometimes other women would substantiate the stories filling up the gaps as they were familiar with the events as a result of innumerable discussions held during the meetings of the NGO. Women use this public forum to not only share traumatic experiences, but also, how they learnt to deal with their problems. Women narrated their stories during their sessions. One to one interviews were held in between sessions, during the lunch and tea breaks and after the sessions of the organisation.

Of all the single mothers who attended the meeting of the NGOs, some are separated; others had been deserted by their husbands. All of them were married at a young age. The age at marriage of these women ranged from 16 to 22 years. They had been separated from their husbands for at least 5 years. Their children were in the age group of 3 to 12 years at the time of the interview. None of them have studied beyond matriculation. Majority of the women are from the Hindu religious community though a few Muslim women are also a part of the organisation. Many of the women, after having become single, fall below the ‘poverty line’ as designated by the state. Their residential arrangements are often temporary, as their financial condition is unstable. One woman worked as a typist, but had to leave the job as she had a serious medical condition. She resides in a rented room with her daughter. Another woman resides in a segregated part of her husband’s house. She resides with three daughters in one room which also serves as their kitchen. An office bearer of the NGO has converted her residence into a home for single women. Trained by the NGO, she works part time in a company which makes food items for local consumption. Two women reside in their parental homes. One assists in tailoring work, while another is an *anganwadi* worker and she is fighting a case against her brothers for a share in the parental property.

### **Becoming Single: Mapping the Terrain**

Geetha (2007), writing on patriarchy, discusses that class, caste, religion, sexual preferences and gender - all mediate the experience of the male authority and resistance to it. Those who adhere to the patriarchal norms are rewarded, and those who do not are stigmatised. According to the norms of patriarchy, and the tradition of patrilocal residence, the woman moves from her natal home to her marital home after marriage (Shah, 1998; Dube, 2009). Despite their socialisation whereby they are taught that they would have to leave their house and move to their marital home, women do not always find the transition easy. Most women face some form of negative sanctions in the marital home, but some women have to struggle far more than others, where their very survival may be threatened. Sometimes they are left with no choice but to move back to their parents’ house.<sup>5</sup> The natal families accommodate them temporarily but they are ultimately expected to go back to their marital homes. This is mostly due to financial constraints and the social stigma attached to a deserted woman. Hence, women move back to the in-laws’ house, or sometimes they continue to live in the same house while creating a separate hearth. Sometimes they set up a separate residence. Singleness, however, becomes their primary attribute-whether unmarried, separated, deserted, divorced or widowed they are all placed under the rubric of “single” (Pappu, 2011).

Some single women with barely any support from the natal or marital family depend on the strength of the collective to fight for their rights. Women who have been a part of the organisation (*sangathan*) for a long of time extend support to other women in similar

<sup>5</sup> Grover (2011) links the customary rights of a married woman to return to her natal home on the basis of the type of marriage (love or arranged).

situations. They extend mutual support to each other, creating a sisterhood outside the bonds of biological kinship. They regard the members of the *sangthan* as their family. The women extend support to each other, both emotional and financial; they function as a collective unit, and fight for their rightful place in society. With membership of the family becoming fluid and not just based on kinship ties, the meaning of family has changed for them. Women centric families are created challenging patriarchy and normative family structures.

### **Natal Family: Changed Relationships after Marital Discord**

Women tend to forfeit rights in their natal home once they are married. Due to the rules of residence after marriage they have to move to the husband's house where they must "adjust" to the family.<sup>6</sup> On being deserted, they find themselves without a rightful place in either family. Of the one hundred and fifty women respondents, approximately 12 per cent had moved back to live with their parents, 6 per cent continued to live with in-laws, 8 per cent were on their own and 20 per cent were in the home for single women. For most women there was a back and forth movement from one residence to another.<sup>7</sup> The reason they continued to live in traumatic marriages is because they are not educated, nor do they have a source of income. They initially lack the confidence to move out and stay on their own. They realised that they were not really welcome in their natal homes largely because of social and economic reasons. The women who could not be accommodated in the parents' house sometimes continued to reside in the house of the in-laws. This is also because of the ambiguous status of the marriage, as the husband is untraceable post his migration to the city in search of lucrative employment opportunities.

Though their parents are often sympathetic, the women's status in their natal home becomes problematic. Parents are supportive of them as long as they continue to reside in their in-laws' house, despite their marital problems. Fathers/brothers are the ones who are called to resolve issues in the marriage. Women are not encouraged to return to the natal home even if they are facing severe marital problems, and if they did return to the parental home, they were usually sent back after some time. The women accepted this as they are socialised to consider marriage as an irrevocable bond. They understand that their parents have meagre resources. However, some women hold a grudge that they have no control over the money that their parents spent on the wedding, or gave to their in-laws, which makes their return to the natal family difficult. The situation is ironic, because, on the one hand, parents show immense concern for the unmarried daughter, and on the other hand, married daughters who desire to return home because of a troubled marriage are not encouraged to do so.

Women, irrespective of the socio-economic class they belong to, are reluctant to fight their brothers for their legitimate share in the parental inheritance, even though they are aware that they have a rightful share in it. The reason is that they are not keen on creating any friction with their siblings. For example, Ritu, whose husband had deserted her when her son was one year old said she preferred to be referred as a widow rather than a woman deserted by the husband to avoid the humiliation. She shared a close relationship with her siblings and they all loved her and yet she said she felt anguished:

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<sup>6</sup> Highlighting the shift in residence after marriage, Abharam (2014) in her work in North Kerala explains how the term 'sent' is a part of the terms used in reference to the marriage of a woman. For a woman being 'sent' in marriage is not only about a shift in residence, but also express the idea that now the husband will provide for her. Although discussed in the context of a matrilineal society there is congruence with patrilineal rules and practices after marriage.

<sup>7</sup> Grover (2011) discusses that marriage breakdowns are not irrevocable and that the 'door remains open' between husband and wives for further reconciliation.

“...But if you go and stay with someone, it is ok only for a few days. After that you feel like a beggar. I sometimes stay with my sister, and take something for her children. She adds something and returns it. What is the point? They always give me clothes and things that they think I cannot afford. I don't ask for anything but they just do it.”

Single women do not require the sympathy or pity of the family; rather they expect their rightful share (economical) to be given to them.

Continuing her narrative, Ritu conveyed that her in-laws had severed all contact with her. She is not eligible for widow compensation on behalf of state policies as she is still legally married even though her husband has disappeared. She has no papers to prove the demise of her husband. Voicing their concern regarding the financial issues, women say they would have welcomed some share of the family inheritance to be in their control. This, rather than the attitude of their natal family, creates immense resentment. It is a cultural expectation of the Indian society that sons would care for their parents. Hence, sons reside with the parents and inherit the property. Daughters who return after a separation or divorce then face problems in the natal households as their brothers regard them as economic liabilities and unrightful claimants of the ancestral/parental property.

Living in the parent's house after marital breakdown, women cannot assert their rights and they have to contain their desires, though there may be subtle conflicts with the brothers over financial issues.<sup>8</sup> However the support of the brother is the only help they could count on and they are grateful for that. They remain silent due to convention and also because they are aware that if they fight their brothers they and their children will not have any refuge.

Despite this, some women do gather the courage to fight for their rights. Consider the case of Kalawati, the 25 year old woman who expressed how the *sangathan* helped her regain the courage to fight for her rights:

“Initially I just attended some meetings. I faced the dilemma of trying to beg my in-laws to take me back for the sake of the child or to fight them for my rights. We had already suffered so much so I did not want to remain silent. I could also make peace with my brother but I really did not want to do that. People ridiculed me. I gradually realised that women also have rights and that they can fight for them.”

With the assistance of the *sangathan* she is not only fighting her and her daughter's rights, but also helps educate other women who are suffering because they are not aware of their rights. She says:

“All the women who are like me are my family now. I have got a purpose in life, to make them aware of their rights and though there are challenges, I am stronger as there are many women out there who are suffering silently, just like I was suffering alone.”

Marriage, especially Hindu marriages obliterates the natal identity of the women. When the woman returns to the natal family after a marital breakdown, realise that the relationship with family members has changed. Women having been deserted by the husband rarely seek a

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<sup>8</sup> Daughters do not usually make a claim to the ancestral property and exchange it for a right to visit natal homes in order to get a respite from the marital home and also for gifts from natal family (Kabeer, 1985).

divorce.<sup>9</sup>The relationship with natal, marital family and husband undergoes change. Women depend on other women outside the family creating larger families. The structure of the family has changed and so has the meaning of relationships within the family.

### **Marital Family: Hostile Relationships**

Single women, who continue to reside in the husband's house even after being deserted, claim that they are ill-treated. Had it not been for social pressures the in-laws would have probably forced the women out of the house much earlier.

Especially for the women whose husbands have been missing for years, the in-laws are not keen that they continue to reside with them for the daughter-in-law and a granddaughter is a financial burden for them. They are keen, though, that their grandson stays with them. The deserted woman is expected to live the life of a widow (the opposite of a married woman) even though the husband has not been declared dead.<sup>10</sup> They face restrictions in relation to food, colour of clothes, attire and access to space and ceremony, as can be seen in Rupa's case. Rupa is the mother of three and is 32 years of age. She was married at 17, and had her first daughter when she was 18 years old. By the time she was 21 years of age, she had three daughters. Her husband migrated to the city after the birth of their third daughter. He said that he would have to work in a city to be able to earn a dowry for the marriage of their daughters. He left against his parents' wishes. Being their only son, they expected him to stay and work on the agricultural land. Rupa was not receiving assistance from any state run programmes. The disputed land of her in-laws is the only source of security for her daughters. Rupa ensures that all the housework is done and she also takes care of her daughters and in-laws. Her mother-in-law remains angry with her as she blames Rupa for the migration, and later, disappearance of her son. Rupa resides in a separate section within the in-law's house and though she performs all the household chores, there is rarely any communication between them. She is totally cut off from the rest of the house and even cooks separate meals for her children. Her only relief is that they have allowed her to remain in the house, "Otherwise where would I go with my girls?" she asks. Rupa is residing in her in-laws' house, but she laments she is treated like a servant. The organisation is educating her on her rights and is trying to secure some portion of the land for her and also organising education loans for her daughters. Initially, that seemed to be an impossible proposition, but with the assistance of the organisation she had gained confidence that this impossible task could be accomplished. Though the struggle is tough, she realises that she must fight for her children as she is both their father and mother. She considers the *sangathan* members her family, as they are the ones supporting her – when both her natal family and marital family regard her as a burden and refuse to give her what is rightfully hers.

Whether the women stay with parents or with in-laws, their position is vulnerable. The parent's house is no longer a rightful place and is a temporary refuge. They realise that post marriage their return to their natal home is problematic. The in-laws' house is now their rightful place, but the in-laws are less tolerant towards them as they have become a burden on them in the absence of their son, and the women are also likely to claim a share in the husband's property.

The respondents alleged they had strong beliefs in traditions, and the situation they found themselves in, was not really something they would have chosen for themselves. For them, marriage is a sacred institution which cannot be dissolved. Women are socialised into

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion on the struggles women face in an unhappy marriage yet refrain from seeking a divorce see Lemons (2014).

<sup>10</sup> Widows face restrictions of various kinds in society (Habazaki, 2014).

becoming good wives, mothers and daughters-in-law, whatever the personal costs. They did not imagine that their marriage could break and a return to the paternal home was never envisaged. The reasons for the break down of the marriage are out of their control, and not really driven by their choices. In some cases, the situation became unbearable and the women were left with no choice but to sever the relationship. For most women however there is a compulsion to continue with the marriage. Parents, though sympathetic, wanted them to work on the marriage, which was often beyond their control. The natal families were ready to help resolve the situation but they always found it extremely difficult, since the blame was laid with the woman, and the man's behaviour was condoned, even if violent or abusive. Since the daughter's share of the property is considered as 'spent' on the wedding, the dowry, and the incessant flow of gifts to the married daughter, she can claim only temporary refuge in the natal home. Sometimes the burden of a loan taken for a daughter's wedding is still being repaid by the parents, and they are unable to offer financial help. Single women then find themselves in a vulnerable position as the family is the only space they understand, and they cannot imagine a life outside the institutions of marriage and family. They are not adequately educated and unable to take up employment outside home. Even if educated, they are not confident enough to go out and earn a living. Women fear that they would be considered "characterless" or become "easy prey" and this would further complicate their lives, make them more miserable and be a cause of embarrassment for their natal family and children.

After having become a member of the organisation they gained confidence. They are now aware of their legal rights. All this has motivated them to educate their children. They are keen that their children, especially daughters, should be educated and financially independent, so that they do not have to undergo similar hardships. They do, however, emphasise the need for a changed notion of family. They now consider education, knowledge of rights and the ability to earn an income as important factors for empowerment. Having become members of the *sangathan* they receive flak from the members of their marital family, natal family and society. Initially, they were very hesitant about taking their private issues outside the sphere of the home, but the collective strength from the NGO gave them the confidence and courage to fight for the rights of their children, if not for themselves. Seeing other women in similar situations and trying to fight together gives a new meaning to their lives. The organisation stands up for their rights as a collective. They negotiate with society and this togetherness gives them strength. The identity of being a single woman unites them.

#### **'Naya Rishtey Naya Parivar': Role of the NGOs as Agents of Empowerment <sup>11</sup>**

The organisation ENSS, unites *ekal naris* (single women) and encourages them to fight for their rights. An initiative of ENSS is to hold public meetings where the problems of single women are heard and solutions sought. The main advantage of this is that women are not only learning to articulate their problems but are also gaining the courage to stand up against hostile neighbours and sometimes even family members. The organisation also conducts one-day camps to generate awareness about the *Sangathan* and its activities. Leadership training is provided to members who show interest and have the potential for becoming future leaders of the movement. Festivals are celebrated by ENSS members to show that even though single woman may be marginalised by their families, yet the organisation stands in their support. The organisation also provides the women with a platform for new kinship relationships. They have devised a method whereby they form relationships with women who are not a part of their kinship network. They have created family units in which older and younger women with children can reside together. They have demanded that the state government grant the women a plot of land in their name, and not in relation to a male member, or a house where

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<sup>11</sup> New relationships new family

single women can live a secure peaceful life, in the companionship of their “sisters”. At present, some women are residing together in a house, which the organisation has managed to get from the state. By doing this the patriarchal dependence on men is mitigated and they can form a familial unit which is not defined in relation to a man. Single women with no place to call home are able to acquire an alternative home and fraternal relationships. The idea, as understood by Berry (2011), is to have a unit in which there is economic viability and mutual support. The organisation helps to arrange small loans for the women whereby they can start a small economic enterprise, and it also trains them in basic skills. It assists women to get the benefit of government programmes like old age pension, widow pension and *Indira Awaas Yojana*.<sup>12</sup> The endeavour of the NGO is to help them attain free healthcare so that they can take care of health related issues. Children are also helped to get government-aided scholarships. A similar programme to empower rural women, at grass root level, was started in Rajasthan. What set it apart from other state led schemes was its emphasis on education and raising awareness linked to employment rather than employment based on a linking of government officials and NGO staff. The most important figures in this structure are the *sathins* (companions) or the village level workers. The group enables women to question authority structures collectively, in order to resolve their issues (John, 2012).

This collective identity of single women in the organisation challenges patriarchal structures by creating women-centric families. Women who are neither kin, nor related through marriage reside together to create a family unit. Not all members of the organisation are necessarily residing together.

Older and younger women when they reside together sometimes face issues related to age hierarchy, but they try to overcome this by assigning tasks on the basis of age and ability. The structure of the family has changed; it is no longer a heterosexual unit. Women are asking for an independent identity, not to be defined in relation to a man. A new family form is created where there is dignity, safety, security, independence and interdependence for women, which is impossible within traditional patriarchal family structures. Women, now live by creating different norms. Kinship has taken on a new meaning with non-kin forming a support group.<sup>13</sup>

The house that is created by the organisation is not like a government shelter home. Women are not keen on going to shelter homes, as there is no sense of belonging in such homes. For instance, Reshma, the 23 year old woman who is now living in an alternate family home, first came to the organisation when she was badly beaten by her husband and forced out of the house at night. Her daughter was a few months old when the incident took place. There was no point telling her parents, she said, as she knew that her father was going to blame her. Moreover, her parents lived in another town. She did not want to tell them about her plight as it would upset her mother. She reached the local hospital and from there she was taken to the organisation. She was scared to return to her husband and was reluctant to inform her parents. Initially, she was not keen on taking help from the organisation and after attempted reconciliation with her husband, she returned. When her father and brother got to know that she had sought the help of outsiders, they reprimanded her, and compelled her to end her association with the organisation. They threatened Reshma with dire consequences, were she to commit the mistake of taking domestic issues outside of the house, as it was a ‘personal matter.’ Although their financial conditions were not very stable, yet Reshma was denied permission by her natal family to seek employment. The physical and verbal violence continued from both sides of the family. Some women from the organisation informed

<sup>12</sup> Under the welfare scheme *Indira Awas Yojana*, the state government provides housing for rural poor in India.

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion on how women create a sisterhood in the act or renunciation and defy the family system see Khandelwal et al. (2007).

Reshma about the Domestic Violence Act and that they could help her file the legal papers if she wished to protect herself.<sup>14</sup> Her husband got to know about her intention to file a complaint against him and threatened the members of the organisation. He turned her out of the house yet again. *Behanji* brought Reshma to her home and arranged a part-time job for her.

A telling tale is that of the *behenji* from the organisation, who became a widow at a very young age and subsequently protested against the atrocities of her in-laws. She claims that she was amongst the first few women who stood against the *atyachar* (cruelty) of patriarchal structures. She returned to her natal home and though her parents were supportive, her brother was not, which she believes was because of her sister-in-law. He even asked her to go back to her husband's house. She then joined the *sangathan* and fought for widows' rights in parental property. She has now converted her own house into a home for women in distress. The biggest deterrent she claims is that women think that they have no support, nobody to turn to, so they continue to suffer at the hands of their in-laws, parents and society.

There is a division of labour in 'the house'. Women, who are earning, voluntarily contribute a part of their income to the household expenses, and the other older women involve themselves with household work and childcare. Women, collectively encourage children to attend school and to study. They get involved with filing paper and making an appearance in court for the cases. *Behenji* is trying to arrange funds from the state government to be able to run the house smoothly and make this a replicable model to develop similar houses across the state.

Women help and support each other in various ways. They find ways to overcome oppression. Sometimes men also become part of this journey. The organisation has some male workers who are dedicated to the cause of women in distress and support women in every way they can.

The 'sisterhood' that the women have created is not easy to come by; there are differences of caste, class and religion. These are beyond the ties of kinship, yet women feel a sense of connectedness, which they had ceased to feel with their family members. Not only the structures, but the meaning of family has changed for these women. The family structure is not based on the conventional heterosexual married couple, but of women, who may or may not reside in the same house, yet support each other and fight for their rights collectively. However, having become bread earners and caretakers, they are not willing to replicate normative patriarchal structures within the families they have created. They have succeeded in creating identities which cannot be typecast into traditional moulds. Imbibing the characteristics of caring and asserting their rights, women cut across traditional gender roles not only for themselves but also for their children.

## CONCLUSION

In the patriarchal system, the identity of a woman is with reference to the male members; hence single women are stigmatised, discriminated against and marginalised. Single women refrain from taking their matter to the courts of law, as they do not have the knowledge, skills, attitudes or resources to deal with such institutions. Cases, if filed in the court, take time, effort and lots of money. Maintenance, if given, is not adequate and there is no follow-up. They are unaware that they can complain against the husband or their in-laws in case of bigamy, dowry harassment, domestic violence, abuse or inadequate maintenance.

<sup>14</sup> The Domestic Violence Act or the Protection of women from DV Act 2005 strives to protect women from violence within the household.

The support of the collective has given a new meaning to the lives of single women. The meaning of family has changed for them, with families being created with both kin and non-kin. Having moved out of the marital homes, some single women live together with their children in the 'house' for single women. The house which they have managed to obtain from the government is not just a shelter house, but also their 'real home.' Women with different crises of life live together under one roof. Women, whether they continue to reside with natal, marital family or outside of these, rework their relationships. Family is no longer a unit of kin residing together and performing functions differentiated by age and gender. The contours of the family are not fixed. Membership may change and so do relationships, yet people remain connected. In the new families connectedness can be across households through various factors ranging from economic support to love and emotional support to companionship.

Women are now raising various issues like domestic violence, dowry, inheritance rights, education for the girl child and issues related to vocational training and employment. It is in the collective that for the first time, they can establish their own identity and are independent to take decisions.

Despite the problems that are a part of their lives, these women have shown exemplary courage. They are educating themselves regarding their rights. They are also trying to avail of the government schemes, which, though not specifically for single mothers, but for widows, and are also trying to avail loans from banks. They are advocating that the government should have specific schemes to address the needs of single women and particularly for single mothers. They engage with the wider society regarding the position of single women and educate them regarding the rights of women. The most important right of a woman is to recognise her as an independent subject with agency, and this is possible only when the inequalities between men and women are reduced / minimised / obliterated.

Women exemplify courage and agency by building alternative families and ways of living. They are not simply victims of patriarchal structures; they have demonstrated that they can challenge these structures and even build alternate ones. They illustrate that when challenged, even disadvantaged women can bring about social change. Their decision to step out of the home and family, too, is a sign of agency. This is where the understanding of individual agency that counters or challenges the exploitative structures becomes important. NGOs which deal with the issues of single women are making an effort to articulate a culture of resistance. The need for single women to come together and redefine their image as women, thus, becomes important and is realised through such organisations.

Thus, we are able to theorise that single women are challenging patriarchal norms and traditions, and building new a form of fraternal women centric family through the collective.

### **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

I extend my gratitude to the members of the *sangathan* and especially to the founder, Ginny Srivastava for allowing me to attend the meetings and providing insights into the lives of *Ekal Naris* and also for connecting me to members of its sister organisations.

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**How to cite this article:** Jalan, A. (2022). Single Women Recreating Family: An Exploration of the Role of the Collective in Empowering Women. *Vantage: Journal of Thematic Analysis*, 3(2): 46-57

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52253/vjta.2022.v03i02.05>

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