

## **The Farm Widows: Unseen Victims of Agrarian Distress**

**Kiran Mann**

Suman Chauhan, Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra

### **Introduction:**

The agricultural sector of the Punjab has been passing through a very difficult phase since 1997. First, the productivity of cotton failed, leaves the entire cotton belt under stress and then the support prices of the paddy and wheat are not in proportion to the total inputs costs (Padhi, 2009). As a result, the agro-economic distress of the farmers' have increased manifold in the state which is manifested to a large number of farmers' suicide in the region. Suicide is such a complex phenomenon which is largely linked with the economic, social and psychological stress of the victims as well as their family members (Kale, Mankar and Wankhade, 2014). A joint study conducted by the three prestige universities of the state, commissioned by the Punjab government revealed that over 16,000 farmers and agricultural labourers took their lives in the state between the period 2000- 2015.

The high incidences of farmers' suicide in Punjab has resulted in an increasing number of single women headed households (The Citizen, 2020). The condition of these Women after their husband's demise is worse than other members of their families. On one hand, they have to cope-up with the psychological setback of sudden loss of their husbands and on other hand, they have to counter with the adverse economic impacts of agrarian crisis added all kind of responsibilities of members of their family. In many cases, they have to face the denial of their legal share in their in-laws' properties such as marital home and agricultural land. Apart from the grief, psychological trauma and severe economic hardship, they have to live in great social insecurity (Prakriti, 2017).

### **Objective:**

The present study aims to reveal the socio-economic profile; especially to have an in-depth understanding of their livelihood problems and challenges, of those women whose husbands have committed suicide.

- To portray the socio-economic characteristics of the respondent widows whose farmer husbands have committed suicide.

### **Database and Methodology:**

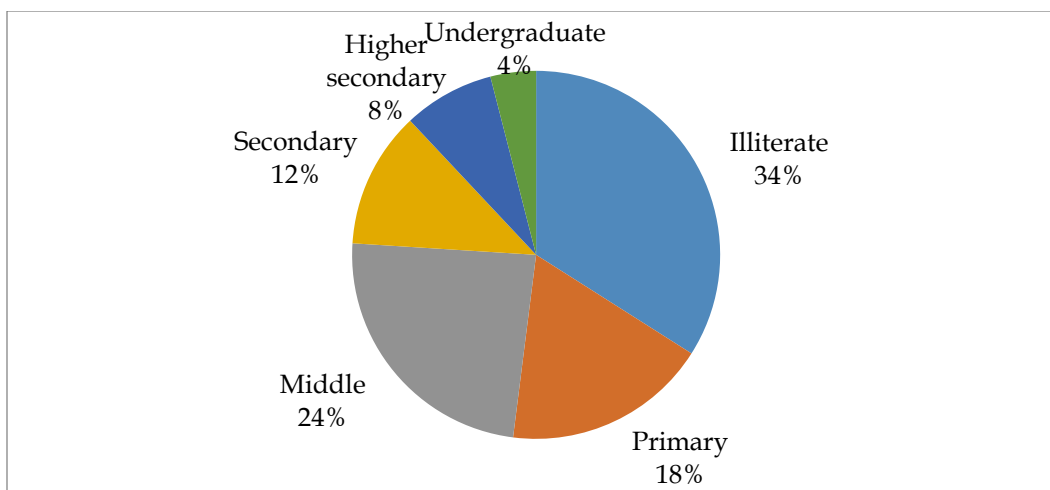
The present study is based on primary survey conducted across 13 (thirteen) villages located in Sangrur district of the Punjab state. 50 (fifty) households, exclusively headed by those widows whose farmer husbands have committed suicides between the period of 2016 – 2019, have been identified (by employing both purposive and snowball technique) from the data provided by the Punjab Agricultural University, Ludhiana and the members of the Baba Nanak Educational Society (NGO working in this field for the past 20 years). Since, suicide is a sensitive matter so, the investigation has been made in with very careful manner without hurting the sentiments of the families. Data were collected by personal interview method with the help of structured interview schedule. Interview was conducted at residences of the respondents so as to review overall situation of the families by the researcher. Primary data has been tabulated and presented in the form of tables, graphs and diagrams.

### **Results and discussion:**

**Table: 1**  
**Educational level of the Respondents**

<b>Sr. No.</b>	<b>Educational level</b>	<b>No. of samples</b>	<b>Percent</b>
1	Illiterate	17	34
2	Primary	9	18
3	Middle	12	24
4	Secondary	6	12
5	Higher secondary	4	8
6	Undergraduate	2	4
7	Total	50	100

Source: Primary Survey, 2020



**Fig.: 1**  
**Educational level of the Respondents**

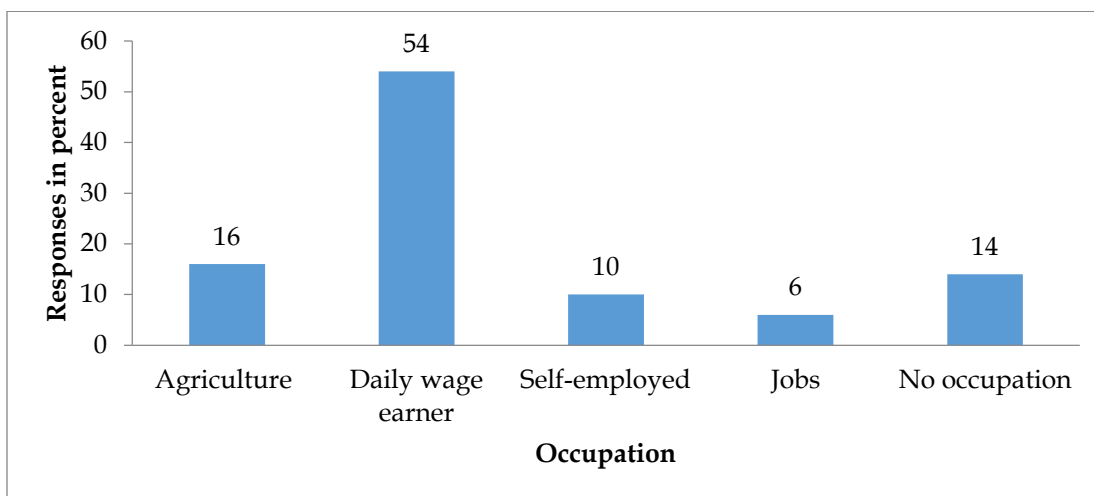
The literacy level of the respondents is given in table no.1 from which it is evident that highest number of the respondents, i.e., 34%, are illiterate and had no experience of schooling. Remaining 18% had primary and 24% had middle level education. Only 12% respondents had secondary level of education. The percentage of those who had higher secondary and did their degree is very low and stood at just 8% and 4 %, respectively.

On the whole, as the primary survey has revealed that a large portion of the respondents have very low level of education. This can be attributed partly to their acute poverty and partly to the perception of irrelevance of girl's education in rural area. Low level of literacy rates amongst the respondent farmers' widows has severely restricted occupational opportunities for them due to which they are unequipped to take up any other livelihood, except labour.

**Table: 2 Distribution of the Respondents by their present Occupation**

Sr. No.	Occupation	No. of samples	Percent
1	Agriculture	8	16
2	Daily wage earner	27	54
3	Self-employed	5	10
4	Job	3	6
5	No occupation	7	14
6	Total	50	100

Source: Primary Survey, 2020



**Fig.: 2**

**Distribution of the respondents by their present occupation**

The present occupational structure of the respondents is presented in the table no. 2 which indicates that a vast majority of the farmers' widows, accounted for 54 % of the total samples, are daily wage earners. It is their prime occupation. 16% are doing agricultural practices along with their elder sons and brother-in-laws. 10% are self-employed who have chosen petty business like small shops, stitching and selling vegetables in the village. 6% of the respondents are employed as helpers in *Anganvadi* and nearby schools. 14% of the respondents have no occupation mainly because of two reasons, either they are too aged to engage in any work, or the unavailability of any work around the village and city is around 40 kilometres away from their village.

Due to low level of literacy, the respondent farmers' widows are unaware of other sources of earning except agriculture and labour. Most of the widows have never come out of their houses because since the overall management of the family affairs was entrusted to their husbands. Their suicides have forced them to work. From the results, it can be inferred that not only the low level of literacy has obstructed occupational opportunities to them but also a social perception of being a farmers' widow has made them not to seek other alternatives of employment. According to the views of one of the respondents, the agriculture in a way rather had ruined their entire household. Ignorance, unawareness, shy and lack of entrepreneurship qualities has restrained them to move to other sectors of employment from agriculture and labour practices.

Table: 3

Distribution of the respondents by Age at Widowhood

Sr. No.	Age at widowhood (years)	No. of samples	Percent
1	20-30	7	14
2	30-40	24	48
3	40-50	14	28
4	50-60	5	10
5	Total	50	100

Source: Primary Survey, 2020

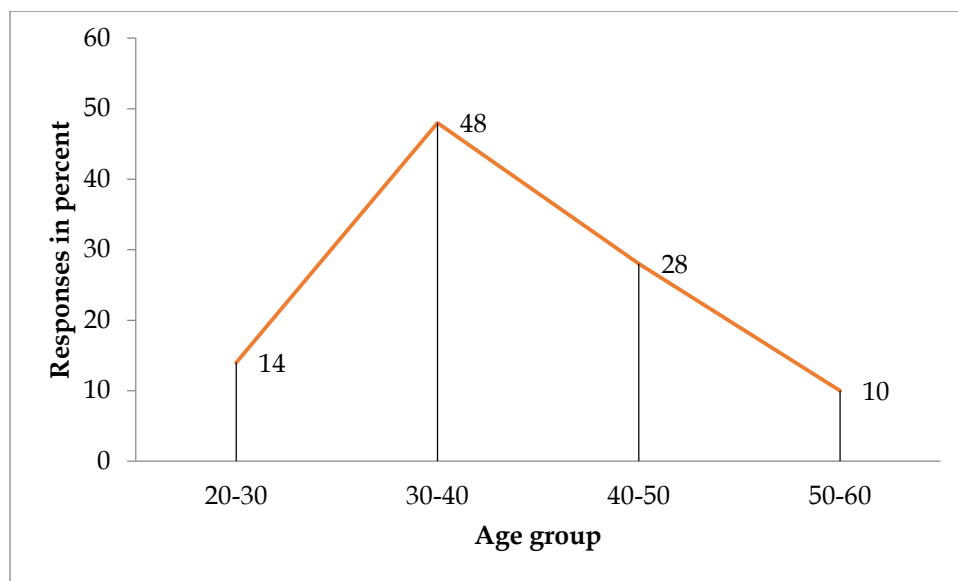


Fig.: 3 Distribution of respondents by Age at Widowhood

Table no. 3, shows the age at which the respondents become widows. It can be seen that 48% of the respondents lost their husbands due to suicide by them in their age group of 30-40 years, followed by 28% in the age group of 40-50 years. 14% the respondent women became widows at the very young age group of 20-30 years.

A large number of farmers committed suicide in Punjab leaving their dependent widows to deal with the state, in-laws, moneylenders and a society at large that stigmatizes them. These widows have to resultantly experiences many difficulties, i.e., getting over the trauma of their husbands' death, repaying old debts, and taking over the responsibility of the households with added stigma of widowhood due to which they face inequalities at family and societal level in a traditional society like Punjab.

### **Monthly Income**

Most of the farmers' widows were unable to answer the question relating to their monthly income as they have no fixed income. It varies from season to season. In peak season their income increases as wages are better and work is available like picking potatoes, carrots or cotton does fetch them only Rs. 50 a day, such work is available only 2-3 months a year. During the lean period, they are dependents on pensions and some petty works like picking cow dung for Rs. 450 a month etc. However, an average monthly income of their family including all these works, is around Rs. 4000-5000, some respondents also stated earnings as low as Rs. 3000 a month.

### **Conclusion**

This study has attempted to highlight the difficult reality of the farmers' widows of Sangrur district, who in the aftermath of their husbands' death, suddenly have to assume multiple responsibilities, including repaying debts, taking care of children & other family members and farming & cultivating land besides struggling for their own survival amidst conditions of stigma, social exclusion, discrimination, and denial of rights. The profile of the respondents in the present study reveals that these women are predominantly illiterates, most of them are daily wage earner and do not have assured income and they have to step into the shoes of their spouses to shoulder all responsibility of their family and farm at very young ages. This shows the picture of distress caused by the changing scenario of agriculture sector. The causes of suicides of farmers and the pitiable situation in which the widows find themselves reflect the existing rural scenario and the helplessness of the system.

Although, there is some attention is given to the phenomenon of farmers' suicide at policy level but the questions of the widows of farmers from suicide affected households have not been given much importance. There is no mechanism or policy for the widows to be freed from the debt made by the deceased farmers. The vulnerability of farmers' widows should be given space in the India's 'New National Policy for Women'. And a special package would be designed for them with alternate livelihood options.

**References:**

- Agarwal, Kabir (2018), “The Farm widow: A suicide and life left behind”, The Wire, <https://thewire.in/agriculture/watch-the-farm-widow-pieces-of-a-life-left-behind-by-a-farmer-suicide>.
- Chandran, Rina (2016), “India’s suicide farmers’ widow face living death”, Thomson Reuters Foundation, <https://in.reuters.com/article/india-farmers-widows-maharashtra/indias-suicide-farmers-widows-face-living-death-idINKCN0Z7 6H>
- Chatterji A, Shoma (2020), “Widows of Farmers who committed suicide Find the Going Tough”, The Citizen, <https://www.thecitizen.in/index.php/en/NewsDetail/index/7/18507/Widows-of-Farmers-Who-Committed-Suicide-Find-the-Going-Tough>
- Hardikar, Jaideep (2008), “Inheritors of debt burden and distress”, Child Rights & You, [www.cry.org](http://www.cry.org)
- Indiaspend (2018), “Thrown out of land and home, Farmer widow, demand rights”, <https://www.indiaspend.com/thrown-out-of-land-and-home-farmer-widows-demand-rights-govt-support/>
- Kale, N.M.,Mankar.D.M.,Wankhade.P.P. (2014), “Consequences of Farmers Suicide and Suggestions Perceived from Victim’s Households to Prevent Suicides in Vidharbha Region”, Global Journal of Science Frontier Research: D Agriculture and Veterinary Volume14 Issue10 Version 1.0, pp.: 43-46.
- Kumar, Taruna (2018), “Widows of Vidharbha highlights the lesser-known perseverance of wives of farmers who commit suicide”, Firstpost,<https://www.firstpost.com/living/widows-of-vidarbha-highlights-the-lesser-known-perseverance-of-the-wives-of-farmers-who-commit-suicide-43678>
- Padhi, Ranjana (2009), “On Women Surviving Farmer Suicides in Punjab”, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 44, No. 19, pp:53-59.

- Singh, Amarjeet and Singh, Jaspal (2016), “Impacts of farmers’ suicide on social and economic condition of victim households”, Economic Affairs, Vol. 61, No. 4, pp. 1-9
- Prakriti (2017), “Surviving Stigma: Housing and Land Rights of Farm Widows of Vidharbha, Maharashtra”, Prakriti Resource Centre for Women and Development, and Housing and Land Rights Network, New Delhi, 2017
- Tare, Kiran (2016), “The Twice Cursed”, India Today News, <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/nation/story/20160829-vidarbha-women-farmers-widows-life-829441-2016-08-17>
- The Hindu Business Line (2018), “Unseen Victims of Farm distress”, <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/opinion/books/kota-neelima-book-review-widows-of-vidarbha-making-of-shadows/article23349489.ece#>
- The Wire (2017), “Urgent need to address Plight of Vidarbha’s Farm Widows, Finds study, <https://thewire.in/agriculture/vidarbha-farmer-suicide-women>
- Wagh, C. Anurekha (2016), “The Challenges of Gendering social security: Agrarian crisis, Precarious livelihood and widow farmer”, South Asia Research Network, working paper no. 2

Kiran Mann  
Research Scholar  
Department of Geography  
Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra  
[kiranmaan08@gmail.com](mailto:kiranmaan08@gmail.com)  
Dr. Suman Chauhan  
Assistant Professor  
Department of Geography  
Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra  
[chauhansuman132@gmail.com](mailto:chauhansuman132@gmail.com)