



Socio-Economic Dynamics of Left-Behind Wives of Farmers Who Committed Suicide in Punjab

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ABSTRACT

Agricultural distress has been a major cause of farmer suicide in several nations, including India, the United States, Australia, and France. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reports that 11,290 farmers committed suicide in 2022 across the country. One of the most neglected and vulnerable populations in rural communities are the left-behind wives of farmers who committed suicide. A number of variables, including demographics, social inclusion, and financial stability, affect their economic status. These widows frequently find themselves forced into informal labour or dependent on insufficient government compensation due to their economic struggles, which include debt burden, limited access to credit, restricted ownership of property rights, and loss of household income. The present study was undertaken with specific objective of understanding the socio-economic characteristics of left-behind wives of farmer who committed suicide. This study explores the socio-economic and psychological distress of farmer widows in Punjab, based on a primary survey in **Bathinda, Mansa, and Sangrur**. Using **snowball sampling**, data were collected from **240 households across 77 villages** through structured interviews and case studies. The study highlights the socio-economic distress of farmers' widows in Punjab, with 42.08 per cent illiteracy, 79.17 per cent from *Jat Sikh*, the majority of respondents belonged to the marginal (50.42%) and small (36.67%) farming households. Early marriages were more common among the respondents. Over 55.83 per cent became household heads, and 87.09 per cent belonged to marginal and small farming families with an average of 1.06 ha operational land holding. Agriculture (62.28%) remained the primary source of income. The findings underscored the need for financial stability, land security, and income diversification to support these left-behind wives of farmers.

Key Words: Agricultural distress, Debt burden, Farmer suicides, Household income, Left-behind wives, Psychological distress, Socio-economic distress.

INTRODUCTION

The deliberate and intentional taking of one's own life, known as suicide, is often impacted by socioeconomic crises. Agricultural distress has been a major cause of farmer suicide in several nations, including India, the United States, Australia, and France. Financial burdens, climate change, decreased farm revenues, and a lack of institutional assistance have all been highlighted as major contributors to suicides. The World Health Organization (WHO) and other researchers

have found that agricultural laborers are more likely to commit suicide due to financial instability and issues with mental health, specifically in developing countries' agrarian economies. Farmer suicides in India continue to be a serious concern, with thousands of farmers killing themselves each year as a result of financial insecurity and agrarian crisis. Despite government-sponsored relief efforts, the crisis continues to impact rural agricultural communities. According to FAO 2020, 82 per cent of farmers are small and marginal farmers, while seventy per cent of rural

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families depend on agriculture as their major source of income. Agricultural productivity is directly related to the economic prosperity of the Indian population. But the agrarian crisis has grown exacerbated due to increasing input costs, decreasing crop prices, and the widening gap between the agricultural and non-agricultural sectors (Sangalad 2012; Kale *et al*, 2014; Singh and Singh, 2016; Bodke and Deshmukh, 2018; WHO, 2019; FAO, 2020; Patil and Hasalkar, 2020).

The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reports that 11,290 farmers committed suicide in 2022 across the country. Between 2000 and 2015, more than 16,000 farmers and agricultural workers in Punjab, formerly known as the Granary of India, committed suicide. Significant debt, diminishing farm incomes, and a lack of alternative work options are major causes of these suicides. One of the most neglected and vulnerable populations in rural communities are the left-behind wives of farmers who committed suicide. These women suffer from great psychological and socio-economic challenges following the death of their husbands, who frequently were their primary breadwinners.

Farmer suicides in Punjab have a significant socio-economic impact on women who are left behind. A number of variables, including demographics, social inclusion, and financial stability, affect their economic status. These widows frequently find themselves forced into informal labour or dependent on insufficient government compensation due to their economic struggles, which include debt burden, limited access to credit, restricted ownership of property rights, and loss of household income. Across the country, women are still fighting for the right to live a dignified life. In every aspect of life, including work, health care, and property rights, women face obstacles. The problems that affect this segment of the population are still not receiving the necessary attention. In terms of demographics, caste, religion, and differences between rural and urban areas further influence their mobility, inheritance rights, and access to resources. Developing strategies that address their

financial instability, social marginalization, and long-term well-being requires a thorough understanding of these socio-economic issues. (Padhi, 2009, 2012; Vasavi, 2012; Rao, 2014; Ghunnar and Hakhu, 2018; Jadhav *et al*, 2019; Sharma, 2019; Falnikar and Dutta, 2019; Mann and Chauhan, 2020; NCRB, 2020; Sahoo, 2020 Singh *et al*, 2021; Sharma and Jain, 2023). Hence, with this the present study was undertaken with specific objective of understanding the socio-economic characteristics of left-behind wives of farmer who committed suicide.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present study was based on primary data collected from rural Punjab during year 2023-24. The span of farmers' suicide considered under the study was from year 2015 till July, 2024. Government of Punjab entrusted three universities viz., Punjab agricultural university, Ludhiana; Punjabi university Patiala; and Guru Nanak Dev university, Amritsar to conduct studies on farmer suicide between year 2000 till 2018 in the state. Based upon the data reported in these studies on number of farmer suicide committed in each district, three districts i.e. Bathinda, Mansa and Sangrur were purposively selected that from where the highest incidence of farmer suicides was reported. A snowball sampling technique was employed, with information on suicide cases obtained from village sarpanches, panchayat members, chowkidaars, and ASHA workers. The data were collected from total of 77 villages (29 in Bathinda, 27 in Mansa, and 21 in Sangrur) of three blocks from each district were selected. A proportionate random sample of 80 households from each district were undertaken to meet total sample size 240 requirements of the study. The widows of the farmers were the main respondents, data were also collected from farmers household using a structured interview schedule designed to assess socio-economic status of left behind. This paper includes the determinants related to the socio-economic profile of selected households of farmer who committed suicide viz. age, caste, education, headship, source of income, main occupation, type of house, type of family, size of family, number of dependents, working members, land ownership and operational holdings etc with

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Table 1. Distribution of left behind wives according to their socio-economic characteristics.

Age at marriage (years)	Bathinda (n ₁ =80)	Mansa (n ₂ =80)	Sangrur (n ₃ =80)	Overall (n=240)
<18	16 (20.00)	13 (16.25)	20 (25.00)	49 (20.41)
18-20	48 (60.00)	41 (51.25)	42 (52.50)	131 (54.58)
> 20	16 (20.00)	26 (32.50)	18 (22.50)	60 (25.00)
Age at widowhood (years)				
≤20	6 (7.50)	4 (5.00)	4 (5.00)	14 (5.83)
21-40	22 (27.50)	21 (26.25)	20 (25.00)	63 (26.25)
41-60	16 (20.00)	33 (41.25)	27 (33.75)	76 (31.67)
>60	36 (45.00)	22 (27.50)	29 (36.25)	87 (36.25)
Literacy level				
Cannot read and write	36 (45.00)	31 (38.75)	34 (42.50)	101 (42.08)
Primary	12 (15.00)	16 (20.00)	10 (12.5)	38 (15.83)
Middle	20 (25.00)	14 (17.50)	14 (17.50)	48 (20.00)
Matric	6 (7.50)	14 (17.50)	15 (18.75)	35 (14.58)
Senior Secondary	5 (6.25)	3 (3.75)	6 (7.50)	14 (5.83)
Graduation	1 (1.25)	2 (2.50)	1 (1.25)	4 (1.66)
Caste				
<i>Jat sikh</i>	52 (65.00)	70 (87.50)	68 (85.00)	190 (79.17)
Scheduled Castes (SCs)*	13 (16.25)	6 (7.50)	8 (10.00)	27 (11.25)
Other Backward castes (OBCs)**	11 (13.75)	2 (2.50)	1 (1.25)	14 (5.83)
Others***	4 (5.00)	2 (2.50)	3 (3.75)	9 (3.75)
Type of family				
Nuclear	40 (50.00)	44 (55.00)	40 (50.00)	124 (51.67)
Joint	40 (50.00)	36 (45.00)	40 (50.00)	116 (48.33)
Type of house				
<i>Kaccha</i>	10 (12.5)	6 (7.5)	10 (12.5)	26 (10.83)
<i>Pacca</i>	42 (52.5)	37 (46.25)	39 (48.75)	118 (49.17)
Mixed	28 (35.00)	37 (46.25)	31 (38.75)	96 (40.00)
Land ownership				
Marginal Farmer (<2.5 acre)	45 (56.25)	36 (45.00)	40 (50.00)	121 (50.42)
Small Farmer (2.5-5 acre)	29 (36.25)	30 (37.50)	29 (36.25)	88 (36.67)
Semi medium and above (>5 acre)	6 (7.50)	14 (17.50)	11 (13.75)	31 (12.92)
Size of family				
Up to 3	27 (33.75)	35 (43.75)	29 (36.25)	91 (37.91)
4-6	47 (58.75)	43 (53.75)	48 (60.00)	138 (57.50)
More than 6	6 (7.50)	2 (2.50)	3 (3.75)	11 (4.58)

Working member in the family				
0	3 (3.75)	0 (0.00)	1 (1.25)	4 (1.67)
1	35 (43.75)	42 (52.5)	39 (48.75)	116(48.33)
2	34 (42.5)	28 (35.00)	34 (42.5)	96 (40.00)
3	7 (8.75)	9 (11.25)	4 (5.00)	20 (8.33)
4	1 (1.25)	1 (1.25)	2 (2.50)	4 (1.67)

Figures in parentheses indicate percentages

Note: SCs* included Majabi Sikh, Ravidasiya, Ramdasiya, Sahota.

OBCs** included Bhaghu, Daheer, Dhimaan, Ghumiar, kharadhiya, Kurba.

Others*** included Khan, Khatri, Meghwal, Menre and Sharma

an objective to understand the changing dynamics of left-behind wives and their households.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The paper analyzed the socio-economic characteristics of left-behind wives of farmers who committed suicide in Punjab. The economic and social characteristics contains information of left-behind wives and other family members of farmers who committed suicide in Punjab which included age, education of respondent, religion, caste, head of household, family occupation, family annual income, family type, family size, ownership of house, type of house, land holdings, gender based dependency etc. The details of socio-economic characteristics are discussed in following tables.

Age at marriage

The data (Table 1) revealed that one-fifth (20.41%) of the respondents got married before they attained the age of 18 years, with the highest percentage in Sangrur (25%) followed by Bathinda (20%) and Mansa (16.25%). More than half (54.58%) of the respondents got married between the age of 18 years to 20 years, with three fifths (60%) proportion of Bathinda. Another one fifth of respondents got married after 20 years of their age.

Age at widowhood

Widows of farmers who committed suicide often belonged to a wide age range, from young women in their 20s to elderly women in their 60s or beyond. It was unfortunate to reveal that 5.83 per cent of the respondents got widowed

up to 20 yrs of their age. Another one fourth (26.25%) got widowed between the age of 21-40 yrs followed by another 31.67 per cent who got widowed between 41-60 yrs of their age. Thirty-six per cent of the women's husbands committed suicide after they attained 60 yrs of their age. Not much district wise difference was found as for age at widowhood was concerned.

Literacy level

Education influences social structures, rules, regulations, and interactions, which help shape society. The data revealed that significant majority (42.08%) of left behind farmers' widows were illiterate; they were unable to read or write, putting them in vulnerable position. Another one fifth (20%) were educated up to middle only. Data further revealed that just 5.83 per cent and 1.66 per cent of the women were educated up to senior secondary and graduation level respectively. Hence, it could be said that literacy level of left behind wives of farmers of these three districts was quite low.

Caste

Caste refers to the system that classifies people into groups based on their birth. Caste is a type of social stratification in which individuals are classified into hierarchical groups based on cultural, economic, and social characteristics. The caste-wise distribution of respondents was taken in to account found that the majority of the farmers who committed the suicide were *Jat Sikhs* (79.17%) followed by Scheduled Castes (11.25%) and Backward Castes (5.83%) across all the three districts. This data indicated a large percentage of

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Table 2. Distribution of households according to their headship, dependents, operational land holding and family income.

Head of household	Bathinda (n ₁ =80)	Mansa (n ₂ =80)	Sangrur (n ₃ =80)	Overall (n=240)
Self	37 (46.25)	49 (61.25)	48 (60.00)	134 (55.83)
Father in-law	15 (18.75)	13 (16.25)	16 (20.00)	44 (18.33)
Mother in-law	2 (2.50)	4 (5.00)	8 (10.00)	14 (5.83)
Second husband	5 (6.25)	9 (11.25)	4 (5.00)	18 (7.50)
Son	19 (23.75)	5 (6.25)	2 (2.50)	26 (10.83)
Father	1 (1.25)	0 (0.00)	1 (1.25)	2 (0.83)
Brother in-law	1 (1.25)	0 (0.00)	1 (1.25)	2 (0.83)
Dependents				
Total dependents	2.46 (59.70)	2.08 (54.43)	2.34 (59.18)	2.29 (57.83)
Male dependents	0.94 (38.07)	0.89 (42.77)	0.88 (37.43)	0.90 (39.27)
Female dependents	1.53 (61.93)	1.19 (57.23)	1.46 (62.57)	1.39 (60.73)
Average family size	4.13 (100.00)	3.81 (100.00)	3.95 (100.00)	3.96 (100.00)
Operational land holdings (Average number)				
Owned land (in acres)	2.97 (100.59)	3.38 (129.74)	2.99 (123.45)	3.11 (117.06)
Leased in	1.29 (43.64)	0.74 (28.54)	0.88 (36.34)	0.97 (36.49)
Leased out	1.31 (44.24)	1.52 (58.27)	1.45 (59.79)	1.42 (53.55)
Operational land	2.95 (100.00)	2.61 (100.00)	2.43 (100.00)	2.66 (100.00)
Family income (Rupees)				
Agriculture	281637 (67.00)	267112 (62.64)	235050 (57.10)	261266 (62.28)
Dairy	29437 (7.00)	32950 (7.73)	43800 (10.64)	35395.83 (8.44)
Services*	81000 (19.27)	69150 (16.22)	94950 (23.06)	81700 (19.48)
Self employed	5100 (1.21)	32100 (7.53)	11850 (2.88)	16350 (3.90)
Income from other sources**	23175 (5.51)	25125 (5.89)	26025 (6.32)	24775 (5.91)
Family income	420350 (100.00)	426437 (100.00)	411675 (100.00)	419487 (100.00)

Figures in parentheses indicate percentages

*Services included anganwadi workers, asha workers, conductors and job in schools

**Income from other sources (rent from leased out land + Pension)

victims' households among *Jat Sikhs* farmers, with substantially fewer cases among Scheduled Castes, OBCs, and other general castes.

districts, reflecting traditional family arrangements in Punjab.

Type of house

Family type

The type of family has a significant impact on social dynamics, roles, and connections within a community. Overall, nearly half (51.67%) of the farmers' households in Punjab had nuclear family structure. Another half (48.33%) of farmers had joint families structure. In Mansa, the nuclear family system was more prevalent (55%) than the joint family (45%) as compared to Bathinda and Sangrur, whereas the trend of joint family and nuclear family accounted for equal proportions of 50 per cent. This suggests that both joint and nuclear family were prevalent across three

The study further highlights the type of houses of the farmers' households. Houses were classified into three categories, viz. *kaccha* (temporary or less durable buildings), *pacca* (permanent or substantial structures), or mixed (a combination of both types). Nearly half (49.17%) of the farmers' families resided in *pucca* houses; Bathinda had the highest proportion of families living in *pucca* houses (52.50%), while the Mansa had the lowest proportion (46.25%). It is surprising to reveal that still 10.83 per cent of households of farmers had *kaccha* houses, with Bathinda and Sangrur accounting for 12.50 per