



THE STATUS OF EKAL NARI SHAKTI SANGATHAN HIMACHAL PRADESH



SUTRA

Social Uplift Through Rural Action,
Jagjit Nagar, Solan Himachal Pradesh

**THE STATUS OF
EKAL NARI SHAKTI SANGATHAN
HIMACHAL PRADESH**

**Written by
Jyotsna Sivaramayya**

Submitted to

**SUTRA – Social Uplift Through Rural Action, Jagjit Nagar, Solan
Himachal Pradesh
February 2024**

Contents

<i>Executive Summary</i>	<i>i</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>iii</i>
<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>iv</i>
<i>List of Tables</i>	<i>iv</i>
<i>List of Case studies</i>	<i>v</i>
<i>List of Photos</i>	<i>v</i>
<i>Abbreviations</i>	<i>vi</i>
<i>Glossary</i>	<i>vi</i>
Introduction	1
The Evolution of Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan in Himachal Pradesh	4
The Impact of Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan	14
Current Situation of Single Women	26
The Way Forward	32

EPILOGUE

Subhash Mendhapurkar

The phenomenal success (in quantitative strength of ENSS membership) and getting Ekal Naree in the main political discourse has some external and some internal factors. Let us explore the same.

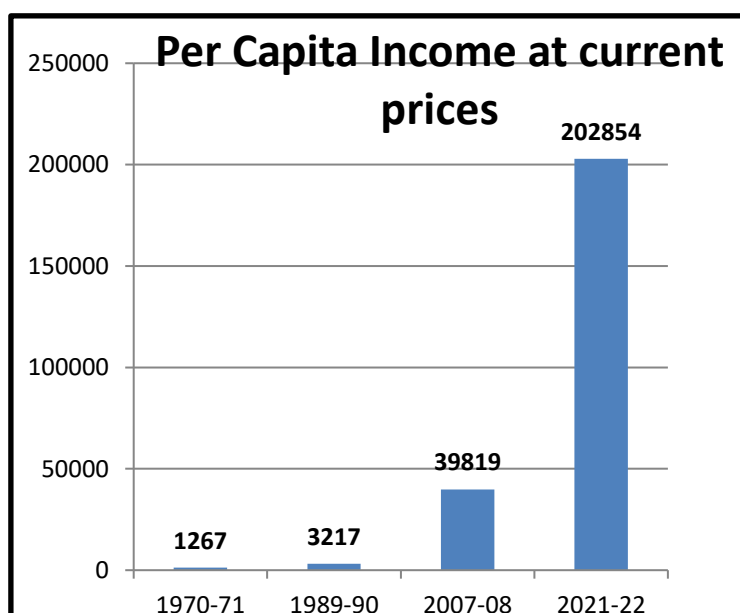
External FACTORS:

Till late 1970s, Himachal was essentially survived on subsistence agriculture and money order economy (mainly from men in defence services and some out migrated men to metropolitan cities).

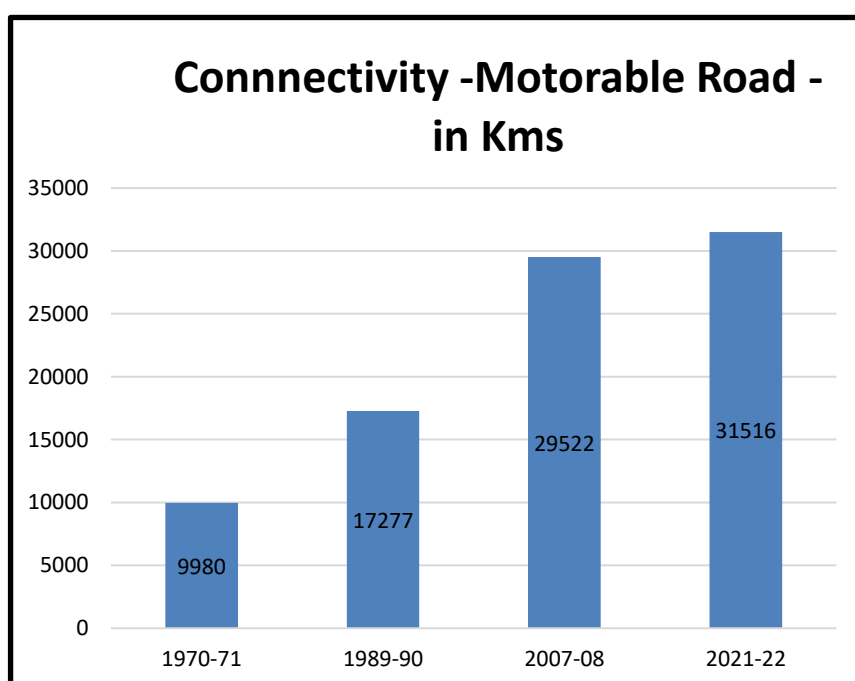
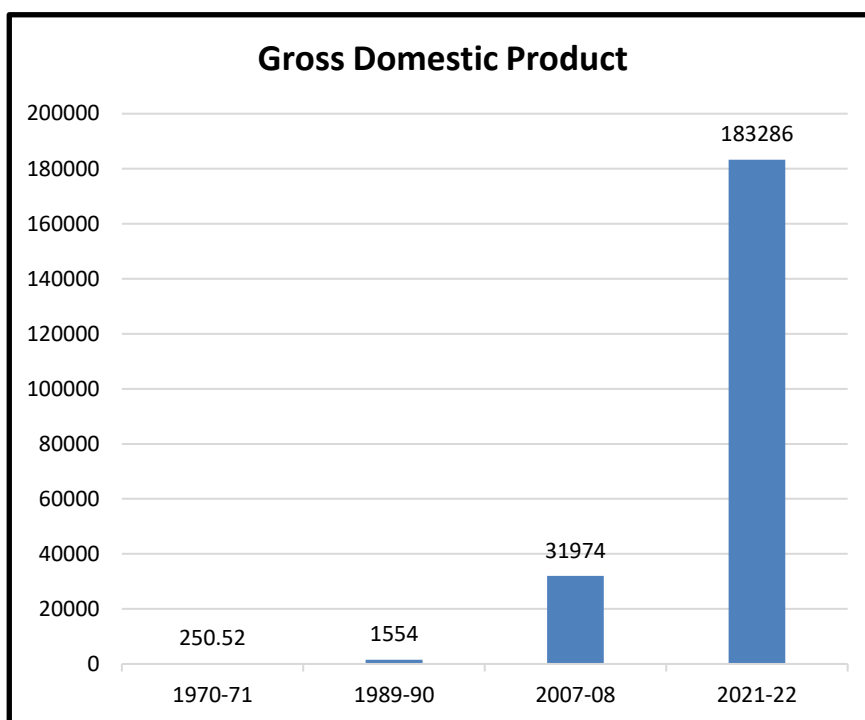
Himachal attained full statehood in 1971 and started receiving generous grant-in-aid from Central Government. This helped the State to expand itself through opening of schools and health care centres. This gave opportunity to large number of youngsters who were High school passed to get into public sector and a steady flow of cash to villagers ensured. Secondly the government also undertook diversification of agriculture – from subsistence to cash crops added with wide range of road network. This enabled farmers to produce vegetables and other sundry fruits and export it to nearby areas such as Punjab, Haryana and Delhi (which has high paying capacity consumers). This added to cash flow into villages. The per capita income in 1970-71 was meagre Rs 1267.00 at current prices and Rs 739.2 at constant prices rose to Rs 3,217 at current prices and Rs 300/- at constant prices in 1989 that means the growth in per capita within 20 years was nearly tripled. Add to this the high cash flow after implementation of 5th pay commission that rose salaries of the employees in Public Sector many fold – further raising per capita income to Rs 39,819 at current prices and in the year 2021-22 to Rs 2,01,854.

Gross domestic product in 1970-71 was 250.52 corer (at current prices) and 237.73 corer (at constant prices) that rose to 1,554 corer (at current prices) and 880 corer(at constant prices) in 1988-89 that rose to 31,974 corer, for the year 2007-08 it was 31,974 corer and in year 2021-22 it was 2,01,854 corer.

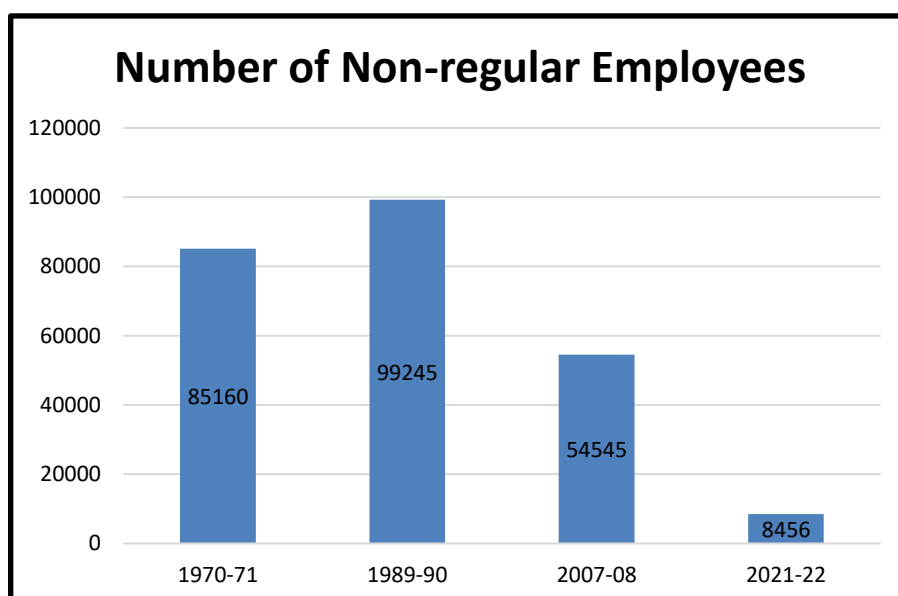
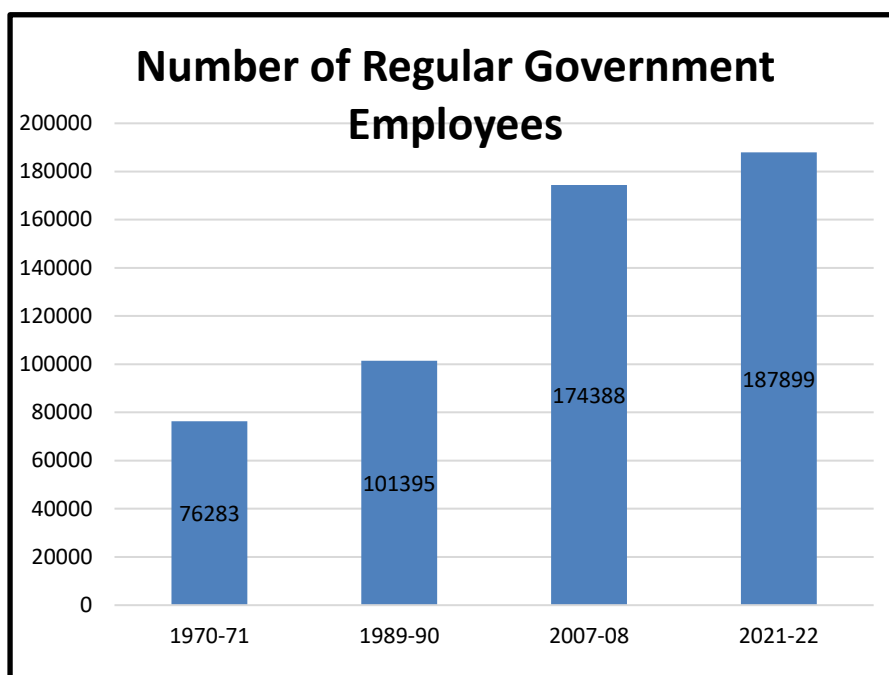
Following bar charts gives the better idea of this.



The data quoted is from Statistical outline of Himachal Pradesh and from Annual Reports of Dept of Police, H.P.



The data quoted is from Statistical outline of Himachal Pradesh and from Annual Reports of Dept of Police, H.P.

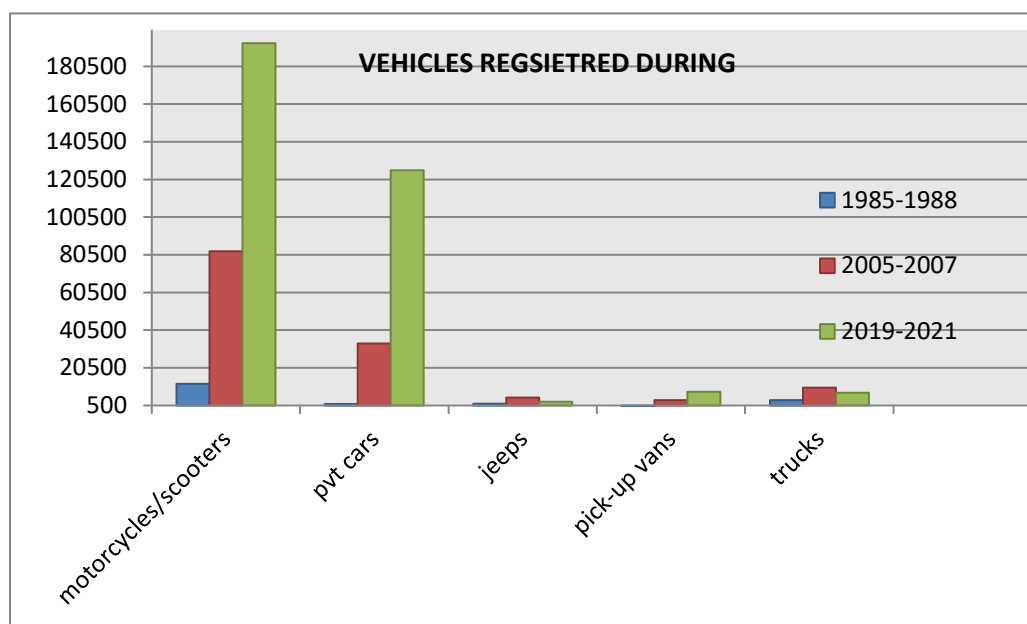


(The number of non-regular employees dropped in 2021-22 as many of the non-regular (contractual employees) employees got regularised under Hon Supreme Court's verdict that said any non-regular employee working for more than 8 years (now 3 years) has to be regularised (provided there are no adverse / criminal cases against her/him) and secondly as generous grant-in-aid from Central Government stopped, that affected fiscal position of the State and thus vacant positions were not filled)

PROSPARITY

The phenomenal rise in per capita income has resulted into prosperity and one of its indicator is taken below – Vehicles Registered during a certain period.

Following bar graph clearly shows this.



MOVING AWAY FROM RIGHT BASED POLITICS

Secondly, during the later part of 1980s, the State saw a very high competitive politics (between Congress and BJP) that forced the ruling party to move away from Right Based politics to Politics of patronization. This had adverse impact on collective life of villagers who till then undertook collective work on their own for their development, like constructing buildings for schools or undertaking manual work to build connecting roads. The Government started funding for each and every developmental demand of the villagers and thus 'sarkari kam' phenomena took place where instead of villagers becoming accountable for quality of work, the Thekedar became one.

SMALLER CONSTITUTANICIES:

Himachal having little over 6.5 million population is divided into 67 State assembly Constituencies, giving average 30 to 40 thousand voters. With such a small constituency, the competitive politics further sharpened as even few hundred votes became deciding factors.

ENTRY OF PRIVATE SECTOR

This prosperity resulted into entry of private sector mainly in Education and Medical Health Care services. Till mid 1990s, these both services were available in public sector and irrespective class and caste, all children attended government run schools and people's dependence on government medical health services was one of the highest in North-West India.

However, as certain families started accumulating wealth, the private sector decided to enter these two sectors. Large number of private schools was opened up and rich families started sending their children to these schools. The education sector saw not only privatization of school education but also higher education. Number of colleges and universities were opened up by private sector. Children from marginal classes were left for government schools creating structural discrimination.

Large number of medicos from government Health Department resigned and started their own clinics as well as medicos from outside Himachal Pradesh opened up their clinics and hospitals at Tehsil / district level. Thus once again, Public Health sector was left for marginal and poor families.

The government employees in these both sectors became unaccountable to their clientele as people from marginal classes had no bargaining power with these 'higher class' government employees. The result: deteriorating standards in service provision. Poor single women were hardly treated with respect by government medicos and children of these single women hardly got quality education.

POLITICAL MARGINALIZATION OF SINGLE WOMEN

We were great promoters of 73rd Amendment and campaigned for 3 Fs (Functions, Functionaries and Finance) for Gram Panchayats. First round of elections threw up large number of wives of Babus, many of them members of Mahila Mandals who were quite sensitive towards women's issues and were quite sympathetic towards single women. As finances started pouring in the Gram Panchayats, its status went up (an ordinary Gram Panchayat with 1200 to 1500 voter started getting more than 10 million rupees under various schemes) by third round of elections (2005), -. Sensing the high financial status of Gram Panchayats, the influential men and women from these families started contesting elections and winning the majority seats. Large number of them belonged to Thekedar families who had money and muscle power. They spend large amount to get elected. This marginalised the Mahila Mandal women in village politics. This upper class belonging to both castes (forward as well as Dalit) were not only patriarchal but also carried with them stigmas attached to single women – especially widows. Due to their financial power and good connections with local bureaucracy they were able to neglect the pleas of single women – especially of single women in their post-adulthood age without much support from families as their sons were not having regular employment or had out migrated and did not provide any financial support to their mothers. Thus neglected at family and further neglected by Gram Panchayat leaders, the situation of these women worsened. Their applications for social security pensions and other government schemes were either kept pending or returned with some excuses.

Few of these women would approach the Local MLA or Block Development Officers, who listened to them but did not act upon – we have documented many such cases in our Nyaya Panchayat booklet.

IMPACT ON SOCIAL-FAMILY LIFE:

Till 1980s, joint families existed and there was willingness of people to work for Collective Wellbeing, but as economy started growing and Globalization reached villages, nuclear families were formed and individual wellbeing overtook collective wellbeing.

Due to better health facilities and nutrition intake, that reduced maternal and infant mortality (bringing down TFR), by 1990s; women started living out men and it increased the number of widows (the similar case of Kerla). This further added to the issues faced by single women. In fact according to 2011 census, every 7th evermarried woman in Himachal was single woman.

As patriarchal based education spread, the rise of nuclear families under 'individualism' started taking place, breaking the joint family structures, the single women in post-adulthood had nowhere to go, their vulnerability increased. This was more visible in New Himachal Pradesh (districts that comprise Kangra, Hamirpur and Una) and to great extent in Bilaspur and outer Mandi districts.

Big quantity of dowry became a sign of prosperity – till 1980-90s, marriages within villages was a small affairs and maximum dowry was gifting a stitching machine along with 11 utensils and 5 to 7

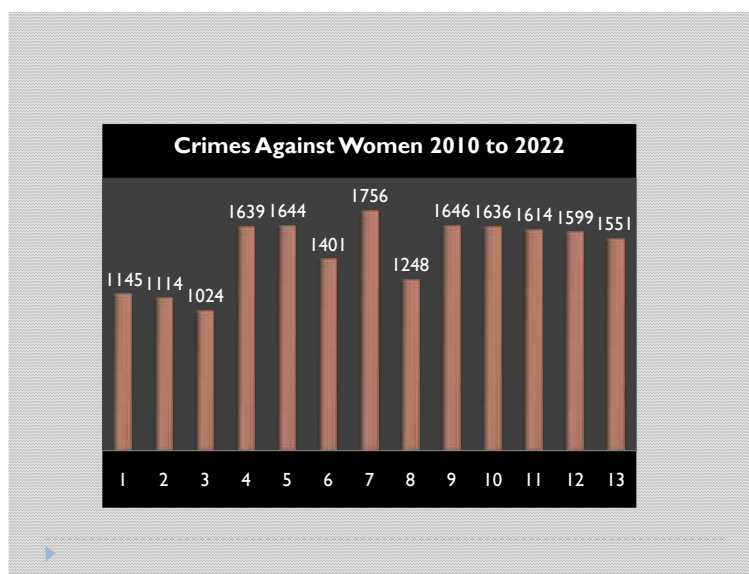
pairs of clothes. By end of 1990s, this changed. A pick-up van full of material – like sofa sets, almirahs and beds- became a standard dowry items. By mid 2010, a truck and a pick-up van full of refrigerators, Beds and set of Almirahs, fans, a car and what not – became a standard dowry items.

As the grooms expected high quantity of dowry, it became difficult for single women to marry off their daughters or get a groom with stable income.

INCREASE IN VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

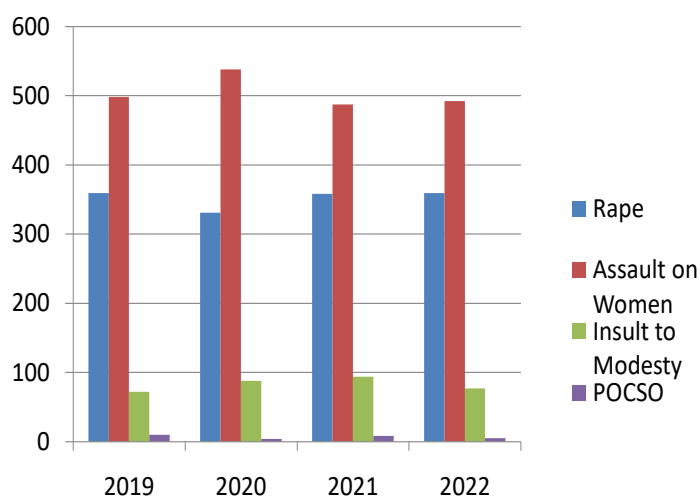
The traditional Pahadi masculinity did not paid any premium on virginity, their main concern was progeny creation and ability of labour input in agriculture and related activities by women. Thus marriages – remarriages were small and clan based affairs. The village society was divided on caste basis; the Dalits were dependent on Thakur and Brahmin landlords. However the Thakurs and Brahmins were of same class. Land Reform that took place in mid 1970s, gave land titles to Dalits and tenant farmers. This ensured steady economic growth along with government filling most of the reserved posts for the Dalits. Thus Hiamchali society that was divided into caste further got divided into class.

The men started moving to plains to sale their vegetables and sundry fruits; got exposed to maidani masculinity that impacted the structure of Pahadi masculinity. Men started paying premium to virginity as well as there was increase in violence against women. Following data shows this clearly:



CRIMES AGAINST WOMEN H.P.

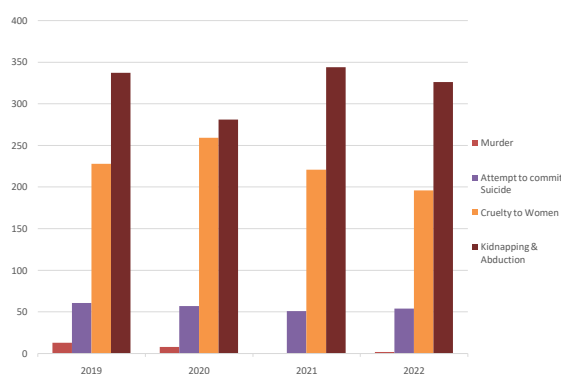
Year	2019	2020	2021	2022
Rape	359	331	358	359
Assault on Women	498	538	487	492
Insult to Modesty	72	88	94	77
POCSO	10	4	8	5



63

CRIMES AGAINST WOMEN H.P.

Year	2019	2020	2021	2022
Murder	13	8	0	2
Attempt to commit Suicide	61	57	51	54
Cruelty to Women	228	259	221	196
Kidnapping & Abduction	337	281	344	326



64

LEARNING FROM FIRST 3 YEARS

Working with single women belonging to different cultural zones for first 3 years, we came across number of issues / problems that these women have to face to access the social security pension and other government schemes meant for them. We list few of them below:

- The parent's maintenance Act passed by Himachal Government says that if the old-aged parent has adult son, it is his responsibility to maintain his parents – thus making old aged women ineligible for social security pension. The question that came up, if the son is unemployed or has casual labour through which maintaining his own family becomes difficult, what and how can he

The data quoted is from Statistical outline of Himachal Pradesh and from Annual Reports of Dept of Police, H.P.

look after various needs of his old aged mother- especially health care needs? In many villages we found young ones have out migrated for jobs and hardly provide any financial support to their mother who has been left behind to look after the house and agricultural fields. When these women approach the Panchayat for social security pension, the Panchayat is unable to forward it.

- b. When a old aged woman visits the Primary Health Centre to seek medical aid, either she is referred to district hospital and has to spend good amount on travel or she is asked to avail medicines from private chemist that costs a lot. Without financial support, how would she meet these expenses. The Insurance covers only when she is hospitalised – no OPD expenses are covered.
- c. Many abandoned women were staying with their parents. When they applied for Social Security Pension, the local Revenue Officer includes the income of her parents that is higher than what the schemes provides and thus, make these women ineligible
- d. Educational grant in aid for the children of single women under Mother Teresa Matrutwa Sambhal Yojana – even though this schemes makes special mention of Paritaktya (abandoned) women, but local authorities have no official definition of Paritaktya and thus they refuse to forward the application.
- e. When a woman applies for divorce, usually these cases take 3 to 4 years for final decision (that is also provided the woman's husband is cooperating) – during this period, she is a non-grata citizen – meaning neither she is married nor she is single and thus there is no financial support available to her.
- f. In the area bordering Punjab and Haryana many marriages take place across the states. If a Himachali woman married off in Punjab and if she returns to her parents due to ill treatment at her sasooral, she is treated as non-Himachali and loses out on all benefits.
- g. As mentioned earlier, many newly elected Panchayat Pradhans belonging to higher income group are quite insensitive towards plight of these women and carry all the social stigmas attached to widows.
- h. Increased in violence against women and adolescent girls gives lot of tension to single women.

THE PAD-YATRA OF 2008

With this background, when ENSS was established in 2005, it provided a platform for women from marginal classes and castes. Irked by the various issues and problems faced by them the single women decided to make their presence felt at State level and press for their demands. Thus Ekal Naree Shakti Sangathan decided to undertake a Pad-Yatra (march on feet) for three days in early April 2008.

More than 2,630 single women from 5 districts belonging to all ages joined the Pad-Yatra. This was the biggest Pad-Yatra in the region, it was covered by all local vernacular as well as English dailies for the entire period of the Yatra, and it became a turning point. Women walked even though the weather gods were very unkind. This forced the political parties in power and in opposition to recognise Single women as 'voters' that can affect the results of the elections in at least 15-16 constituencies. Thus, it wasn't a surprise that the then Hon chief Minister left the Vidhan Sabha to listen to them and accept the memorandum submitted by ENSS. He also instructed each and every department to find or create spaces for single women within their mandate.

Taking into considerations these external and internal factors, the rise of ENSS wasn't a surprise. **However, we decided to undertake a study to locate the Status of ENSS as Sangathan in 2022-23 and entrusted this to Ms Jyotsna Sivramayya.** True, it was delayed by a year, but now the Study is available and we decided to put it in public domain for comments.

Executive Summary

The Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan (ENSS) is a collective of single women that was established first in Rajasthan to address the needs of single women. Later, chapters of ENSS were also set up in other states, including Himachal Pradesh. ENSS started working in Himachal Pradesh in the year 2005 with active support from the NGO Social Uplift Through Rural Action (SUTRA) in Solan district.

There is no single definition for single women in government policy. Thus legally single women fall in a grey area regarding their rights. The national forum of ENSS has defined a single woman as ***“a woman not living with another person in a marriage or marriage-like relationship”***. ENSS also includes as single women those, whose husbands are in prison or are mentally disturbed leaving the woman to be the head of the household. This definition excludes those women who are lesbian and living with another woman in a marriage-like relationship, and also those women who are living with a man “common law” or “natra” without marriage.

The ENSS project is currently housed in SUTRA. The decision-makers in SUTRA felt that there was a need to write a status paper on the situation of single women in Himachal Pradesh since ENSS started working in the state. The status paper is based on both primary and secondary data.

Evolution of ENSS in Himachal: When ENSS started working in Himachal, initially it was difficult to gather women, as at times family members would not allow single women to join. There were instances when villagers also did not allow a meeting to be held in the village as the gathering of so many widows was seen as a bad omen. A study to understand the situation was carried out in 2005-06. It found that women were not receiving welfare such as widow pension and faced psychological and physical abuse. Those women who returned to their natal homes were also not welcome. To raise awareness about the plight of single women ENSS carried out a march in 2008 from Solan district to Shimla and also met the Chief Minister. ENSS has come a long way since then. In Himachal Pradesh, ENSS is working in seven districts in 21 blocks, covering 516 panchayats.

Impact of ENSS: ENSS has made a substantial difference to the lives of single women. The impact of ENSS has been categorised under three sections – 1) access to social security schemes and other entitlements, 2) empowerment of single women, and 3) advocacy for rights and visibility of single women. Access to social security schemes and other entitlements: ENSS has ensured that single women get their entitlements regularly. This is one of the biggest successes of ENSS. The report looks at welfare schemes that single women are entitled to, and how many have been able to access them. Another important impact of ENSS has been to empower single women. This has partly come about due to bringing single women together. Women have also been told about their rights, and how to access them. Due to efforts of ENSS, women have started attending the gram sabhas, etc. ENSS has also started self-help groups and carried out several capacity building trainings. Since the beginning, ENSS has been advocating for the rights and visibility of single women. The biggest mobilisation was in April 2008, when Nirmal Chandel of ENSS led a march to

Shimla to present their demands to the chief minister of the state. Apart from this, ENSS has been organising public hearings, lobbying with political parties, carrying out marches for single women's rights.

Current situation of single women: ENSS has had a big impact in improving the lives of single women, however there still are areas where more work needs to be done. These are social issues such as stigma, harassment, etc. Lack of livelihood opportunities is another issue. Welfare provisions are not enough to make ends meet. Many women complained that while they qualify for the BPL category, their names cannot be included because the BPL quota is already full. Administrative issues such as a lack of quorum in the gram sabha and name not being added in the panchayat parivar register prevents women from accessing schemes. Social and economic problems have a major impact on the health of single women. Many single women suffer from chronic stress, anxiety and depression.

The way forward: The last section is about issues about single women that ENSS needs to take forward. It also looks at ways of strengthening the organisation. An important issue is that ENSS has focused on practical gender needs, while not so much on strategic gender needs. The organisation needs to see how single women can be agents of social change. Other issues that need addressing are livelihood issues, needs of marginalised communities, adding names in parivar register and capacity building for activists and members.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Mr. Subhash Mendhapurkar, Director SUTRA, Himachal Pradesh for giving me the opportunity to write this report. I am grateful to Ms. Sandhya Gautam for recommending my name for this report.

This report would not have been possible without the support received from all the members of Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan, Himachal Pradesh. Special thanks are due to Ms. Nirmal Chandel and Ms. Radha Raghwal.

During the fieldwork, I was assisted by students from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences - Ms. Aneeqa Khalid and Ms. Chhava Mahaur who participated in FGDs and transcribed them. Ms. Sandhya Gautam and Ms. Gurjeet Kaur also participated in FGDs and interviews. I thank them for their contributions.

The report has benefitted immensely from the comments of Ms. Giny Shrivastav, Ms. Gurjeet Kaur and Ms. Ena Singh who took time out to go through it. I am very grateful to them.

List of Figures

Figure No	Title	Page No
Figure 1	Structure of Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan	9
Figure 2	Membership from year 2005-2023	10
Figure3	Total members and number of widows from 2019 – 2023	11
Figure 4	ENSS Members who are divorced, deserted, unmarried, whose husbands have disappeared, husbands are in prison and are <i>kinnar</i> ; Year 2019-23	11
Figure 5	ENSS Members who are divorced, deserted, unmarried, whose husbands are absconding and husbands are in prison; Year 2014-19	12
Figure 6	Number of members who are HIV+ and disabled: 2019-2023	12
Figure 7	Number of Muslim, HIV+ and Physically Challenged ENSS Members	13
Figure 8	Number of ENSS members who received their pensions from the government 2006-23	14
Figure 9	Number of members who got a contractual government job and enrolled in MNREGA, 2006-23	15
Figure 10	Mother Teresa Scheme recipients, 2006-23	15
Figure 11	Those receiving Mukhya Mantri Kanyadan Yojana (MMKY) and District Deputy Commissioner Fund (DDCF) for marriage	16
Figure 12	Number of members who received sewing machines, 2006-15	16
Figure 13	Number of members who received sewing machine, LPG cylinder and solar light, 2015-23	17
Figure 14	Those given BPL card and grant for house construction, 2006-23	17
Figure 15	ENSS members enrolled for health insurance, received grants for house repair, enrolled in PM-Kisan and E-Shram.	18

List of Tables

Table No	Title	Page No
Table 1	Total women, currently married, never married, widowed, separated and divorced by age in Himachal Pradesh. (Census of India 2011)	8
Table 2	Spread of ENSS in Himachal Pradesh till 31 March 2023	10
Table 3	Number of Dalit and Muslim members, 2019-2023	12
Table 4	Total ENSS members who have availed various welfare schemes	18
Table 5	Number of ENSS members who received grants from temples	19
Table 6	Number of Self-help groups (SHGs) started for ENSS members	22

List of Case Studies

Case Study No	Title	Page No
Case Study 1	Case Study – Reena	26
Case Study 2	Case Study – Anita	30

List of Photos

Photo No	Title	Page No
Photo 1	Chief Minister Mr. Prem Kumar Dhumal addressing single women when the march reached Shimla on 3rd April 2008	23
Photo 2	Nirmal Chandel receiving 'Women Transforming India' award from Niti Aayog on 9 th September 2016	24
Photo 3	Photo 3: Copy of List of demands in Hindi to presented to all political parties before state elections in Himachal Pradesh in November 2022	25

Abbreviations

ENSS	Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan
FGDs	Focused group discussions

Glossary

Anganwadi	Government centre that distributes supplemental nutrition for children
Bhai Dooj	The festival of celebrating your brother
Dalit	Historically oppressed castes which are in the Scheduled list of the Indian constitution
Ekal Nari	Single women
Gram Sabha	General body meeting of village panchayat
Jan Sunwai	Public Hearings
Karwa Chauth	Festival when married women keep a fast for their husband's long life
Kinnar	Eunuch
Mahila	Woman
Natra	Live-in relationship
Nyaya	Justice
Panchayat	Council of locally elected representatives
Panchayat Pradhan	Leader of the council of locally elected representatives
Raksha Bandhan	Festival when sister ties a thread on brother's wrist for being her protector
Rakshak	Protector
Sammelan	Conference

REPORT ON THE STATUS OF EKAL NARI SHAKTI SANGATHAN HIMACHAL PRADESH

INTRODUCTION

Background

Historically women have been at a disadvantage in Indian society. Women have to fight a hard battle to realise their rights. For single women, this is more difficult given the premium placed on marriage. In a patriarchal society like India, single women continue to be looked upon as an aberration. In India an adult woman's identity is linked to her marital home and husband. As a result, women who are not married face a lot of social and economic problems. Widows are seen as inauspicious, often blamed for the husband's death and are socially marginalised. Apart from the social stigma, widows face economic hardships as a woman's role is seen as a home-maker. While women contribute a great deal in terms of labour, they are not engaged in remunerative work. A man is seen as the main breadwinner and protector of the family. The unpaid economic activities and care work that women do has rarely been acknowledged in its entirety. A report of the State Economic and Statistics Department of Himachal Pradesh titled 'Women's Unpaid Economic Contribution Himachal Pradesh' reveals that the 'value of women's unpaid work for various economic activities was estimated to be of Rs 15,939 crore and the total contribution of women for all types of unpaid work is estimated as Rs 9,479 per month per woman'¹.

Widows, separated, deserted and never married women are viewed as easy prey and face sexual harassment in a patriarchal society where a husband is considered necessary to protect a woman. Remarriage for women is not encouraged in some communities. And often it becomes difficult for a woman to remarry when she has children. In addition, the husband's family is also concerned about keeping any land within the family. Therefore a larger percentage of women as compared to men remain single after the death of the spouse or after divorce. As a result many widows find themselves dependent on the marital family. Their status within the family is also precarious, having few economic and legal rights. Divorced and separated women also face marginalization. Their return to the natal home is often seen as an economic burden and a social stigma. The dominant social view is that a woman should stay in her marital home till her death. Similarly women who have never married also feel insecure since they may be economically dependent on their parents and brothers.

The status of women has improved considerably since Raja Rammohan Roy started the movement to stop the practice of sati in the 18th century. Indian women today can be seen in different professions. The percentage literate women in the country is also increasing continuously. Despite these changes in society, single women do face problems at many levels. The Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan (ENSS) is a collective of single women that came

¹ Himachal govt for women empowerment: Jai Ram. Statesman News Service | Shimla | March 8, 2018 10:20 pm.

together first in Rajasthan where they could discuss their problems and provide support to each other. Later, chapters of ENSS were also set up in other states including Himachal Pradesh. In Himachal, the ENSS project is currently housed in the NGO Social Uplift Through Rural Action (SUTRA) in Solan district. SUTRA has been involved with ENSS since its inception in the state. The decision-makers in SUTRA felt that there was a need to write a status paper on single women in Himachal since ENSS started working in the state.

Objective of the status paper

ENSS started working in Himachal Pradesh in the year 2005 and has made a difference to the lives of single women. The objective of this status paper is to understand the changes that have come about in the status of single women since the inception of ENSS and the issues and problems that they still face. This paper looks at the following aspects:

The evolution of ENSS in Himachal Pradesh - The paper looks at the context and development of ENSS in Himachal Pradesh. It looks at how ENSS came to be set up in the state and its organisation and activities.

The impact of ENSS activities on the lives of single women – The impact of ENSS on the lives of single women is discussed.

The current situation – The paper looks the issues faced by single women in Himachal Pradesh.

The way forward – The last part provides recommendations and a vision statement to take the collective forward.

Methodology

Methods

The status paper is based on both primary and secondary data. Various reports of ENSS were reviewed and primary data was collected using qualitative methods. Interviews and focused group discussions (FGDs) were carried out with single women in areas where ENSS is present and with activists of ENSS in the field.

Geographical area

An effort was made to cover different districts since there are cultural, ecological and economic differences between districts. Interviews and FGDs were carried out in six of the seven districts of Himachal Pradesh where ENSS is working. The districts visited for writing this status paper were Solan, Bilaspur, Una, Kangra, Chamba and Mandi.

Study participants

The majority of participants in the study were associated with ENSS. A few had come to know about ENSS the same day or a day before. The study ensured that different types of single women were included in the study. The study included:

- Women who have joined ENSS in the past five years
- Women who have been ENSS members for a long time
- Women over 45 years of age

- Women below 45 years of age
- Dalit women
- Non-dalit women
- Women in rural areas
- Women in urban, semi-urban and cantonment areas
- ENSS activists working since many years
- ENSS activists who have joined in the last five years

THE EVOLUTION OF EKAL NARI SHAKTI SANGATHAN (ENSS) IN HIMACHAL PRADESH

The Origin of ENSS

The seeds of ENSS were sown when widows in Rajasthan first started to organize themselves with the help of local NGOs. It was decided to form a collective of widows, since it had been observed that widows were not joining women's groups. Widows joined women's groups only when the group leader or NGO worker or the government functionary herself was a widow. Therefore it was decided that a separate collective should be formed for widows which would also help in keeping this collective going in the long run.

The ENSS was formed in 1999 in a *sammelan* held in Jaipur district, Rajasthan. It acquired a formal structure and name in the year 2000 in a meeting held in Udaipur. Though initially started by widows, they also decided to include separated, divorced and other low-income single women. ENSS is a membership based organisation of and for low-income single women. The organisation soon spread to different districts of Rajasthan. Providing a dignified life for all women is the dictum of ENSS.

There is no single definition for single women in government policy. Therefore besides facing social and economic marginalization, legally single women fall in a grey area regarding their rights, especially their property rights. In addition many single women are either unaware of their rights or are unable to exercise them due to social pressure.

ENSS therefore has put forth an inclusive definition of single women. ENSS views a single woman as any woman who is living alone due to reasons such as death of her life partner, divorce, desertion, missing husband, husband who renounced the world and women who have never got married. In addition the ENSS also includes as single women those whose husbands are in prison or are mentally disturbed leaving the woman to be the head of the household. Therefore a single woman is ***"a woman not living with another person in a marriage or marriage-like relationship"***. This definition excludes those women who are lesbian and living with another woman in a marriage-like relationship, and also those women who are living with a man "common law" or "natra" without marriage.

ENSS in Himachal Pradesh

In October 2004 Ms. Nirmal Chandel a single woman working in SUTRA and six other single women from the state participated in a convention of single women organized by ASHTA (a NGO) in Jaipur. This convention provided the motivation to start a chapter of ENSS in Himachal Pradesh too. Despite the great strides made in terms of women's empowerment in Himachal Pradesh, single women continue to be marginalised. In Himachal too, they face social and economic difficulties, and have remained invisible to policy makers. It was felt that single women in Himachal too needed a forum where they could discuss their problems and lobby with the government.

While it was recognized that the issues of single women have to be addressed, most NGOs felt that it was too difficult an issue for them to handle. Therefore SUTRA decided to support the project. In the next six months, SUTRA was involved in the strategic planning of the project. This was a difficult issue since there were no studies on the status of single women

in Himachal. In May 2005, 14 organisations met at the SUTRA campus in Jagjit Nagar to discuss the status of single women in seven districts of Himachal Pradesh. Subsequently, it was decided to carry out a survey in seven districts of the state. This was carried out by 16 organizations in 18 blocks of seven districts.

Support from the government of Himachal Pradesh

The first convention of single women in Himachal Pradesh was held in SUTRA's campus from 1st to 3rd October 2005. This was a state-level convention where 130 women participated and agreed to start organising single women. The convention received support from the Ministry of Women and Child Development of the Himachal Pradesh government with the Director of the ministry attending it. The Himachal Pradesh government accepted the demand to introduce the principle of equity in the distribution of widow pension. Till then, all widows received the same pension amount, irrespective of whether they had children to bring up or not. After the convention, the state government allocated Rs. 60 million for the next financial year as educational grant for widows with children in the below poverty line (BPL) category. This was the first success of ENSS in Himachal Pradesh.

Growth of ENSS from 2005

At the first convention in October 2005, it was felt that the first step should be to collect information on single women in Himachal Pradesh since there was no data. From 2005 to 2006 a situational analysis was carried out of single women in areas where ENSS had started working. The data revealed that the largest category of single women consisted of widows and among them most were over the age of 55 years. It emerged that 30 percent of the single women were separated.

The situation analysis that was carried out found that single women were seen primarily as mothers and their issues as single women was not emphasised in policy formulation. Their economic contribution as unpaid family labour was not recognised. Single women did not have awareness about their rights to land, social security schemes and faced many social and mental pressures. And even if they were aware of their rights, single women found it difficult to access them. The lowest levels of the bureaucracy were also not responding to the needs of single women. Single women also did not participate in the gram sabha of the panchayat.

In the prevailing situation ENSS activists felt that the most important issue was to raise awareness among single women about their rights. With this in mind ENSS in Himachal decided to bring single women together. The activities to bring women together happened at the panchayat level. Single women contacted each other and thus the membership grew to nearly 6000 in the first year itself. This success in getting members in Himachal Pradesh was not found in other states where ENSS had started working at the same time. The membership grew steadily in the following years as new blocks in the seven districts were added. In 2012, 38% of ENSS members were from the Dalit castes and efforts were made to include HIV+, differently-abled and Muslim women too. Apart from raising awareness about their rights, ENSS also helped single women apply for various social security schemes, filing FIRs, dealing with the police, the bureaucracy and mediating between them and their family. In a few cases legal help was also provided.

ENSS faced a difficult situation when they started to mobilise single women. In many instances women going for meetings organised by ENSS did not get any support from their families or the community. Some faced insults and mistreatment in the community. In a few places when women wanted to gather for a meeting, they were not allowed to do so since the community felt that if so many widows were in one place it would bring bad luck to the village; so women then gathered below the trees. When the first state level ENSS meeting was organised only 120 of the 200 participants came for it. Many were discouraged by their families to attend the event. When single women tried to apply for social security schemes, they were asked to pay bribes by the local bureaucracy. At the same time there were instances where the panchayat pradhans in some villages provided space to ENSS to hold meetings in the village.

Issues Faced by Single Women from Situation Analysis Conducted in 2005-06.

Widows

- The majority of widows over the age of 55 did not receive any support from the family.
- Only widows of army personnel received pension.
- Very few of the non-army widows were covered by any pension scheme. Even those who got any, the amount was too meagre to cover basic needs.
- The pension did not take into account whether the women had children to bring up or had a mentally challenged child; or was living alone. Every widow received the same pension irrespective of the size of the family.
- All widows faced problems such as not being allowed to visit parents as they were treated as free labour.
- Widows faced psychological abuse from in-laws
- Their labour contribution to the household was never recognised and did not receive any compensation for it. The fruits of their contribution were controlled by male members of the family.
- Women's contribution was not officially recognised either and hence had no claim to any pension. With families becoming nuclear, widows were left to fend for themselves. As a result widows were living in penury.
- Even widows of army personnel who were getting a pension could not remarry for the fear of losing it.
- Widows could not wear new or brightly coloured clothes or a nose-pin.
- Widows and their daughters faced violence.
- Widows had to endure pressure for sexual favours within the marital family.
- Those who went back to their parental family were not always welcomed.
- Often the parents did not have the means to support the widow.
- Though the law gives the right to widows to inherit land, often she had no control over it or was pressured by the family to give it up.
- In cases where the land was in the deceased husband's name, at times the in-laws opposed it.

Divorcees

- Problem in receiving maintenance and other assets that the ex-husband owed them.

- Financial problems made it difficult to go to court to receive their due.

Deserted and separated women

- Separated women did not have any proof that they were not staying with their husband and therefore were unable to avail government schemes.

Woman's name not entered in parivar register of the panchayat by husband

- In the some cases, the husband had not registered the wife's name in the panchayat. Due to the lack of legal proof, women found it very difficult to fight for their rights.

Access to social security schemes

- Most schemes saw women primarily as mothers. The welfare of women and the problems of single women were not addressed by policy.
- Women were not even considered for jobs that were reserved for them in policy such as water carrier or anganwadi worker. These jobs instead were given to relatives or friends of the panchayat Pradhan or other officials.
- In case single women got the job, they were denied the meagre pension.
- Single women did not have a ration card in their name.
- Women did not know what they could apply for from the government

The March to Shimla

To highlight the plight of single women ENSS in partnership with SUTRA decided to carry out a march from Dhami in Solan district to Shimla the state capital in from 1st to 3rd April 2008. The march was led by Nirmal Chandel who had initiated ENSS in Himachal. The objective of the march was to make the community and the government aware of the problems faced by single women. A huge media campaign was launched for this march. The march attracted a lot of attention across the state and was covered widely in the press. This was a three day long march in which 3538 single women participated and covered a distance of 45 kilometres. Even women in the age group of 70-80 years participated. When some of the senior citizens found it difficult to walk, the younger women carried them on their backs. When the march reached Shimla it was raining heavily but the women were full of enthusiasm. The Chief Minister Mr. Prem Kumar Dhumal came out of the state assembly which was in session to meet the single women. He announced that hence forth single women would be given separate ration cards. The chief minister also declared that all pending cases of single women would be expedited and they would be given free medical treatment in health facilities.

This march was a turning point in the lives of single women. Single women who had been suppressed by the family and the community developed the courage come out and protest. They gained the confidence to speak to politicians and policy makers at the state level. The women felt that they would march again if their needs were not met. At the policy level and government level the march brought to the forefront the needs of single women as a separate category. The term **Ekal Nari** (single women in Hindi) gained currency in government and general public. Since then, ENSS has participated in various rallies to increase allowances to single women and to protest violence against women.

Status of women in Himachal Pradesh

Himachal Pradesh is one of the most literate states in India. The state's literacy rate has gone up from 76.48% in 2001 to 82.80% in 2011. Women's literacy in Himachal Pradesh has gone up from 67.42% in 2001 to 75.93% in 2011. The literacy levels for the scheduled caste/dalit population was 78.9% and 73.6% for scheduled tribes. Among dalit women literacy was 71.5% and it was 64.2% for scheduled tribe women. This is of importance as literacy is considered a parameter of women's empowerment. Statistics also show that the female labour force participation is much higher in Himachal than for the whole country as per the Periodic Labour Force Participation survey 2020-21. Himachal has the third highest female labour force participation rate of 51.4%, after Sikkim and Ladakh. For the whole country, the female participation is only 27.5%. Despite the position of women being better than other parts of India, single women in Himachal Pradesh continue to face social and economic problems.

In Himachal Pradesh, the median age at first marriage is 22.5 years among women aged 25-29 years and 21.1 years among women aged 25-49 years. Only 13 percent of women in the age group 20-49 years have never married, compared with 28 percent of men aged 20-49. Only five percent of women aged 20-24 years got married before attaining the legal minimum age of 18 years, down from 9 percent in NFHS-4. Fifty-seven percent of women age 20-24 years are never married, compared with 91 percent of men in the same age group, showing that the age at marriage is much lower for women than men in Himachal Pradesh.

Table 1: Total women, currently married, never married, widowed, separated and divorced by age in Himachal Pradesh. (Census of India 2011)

Present Age	Total women	Currently married women	Never married	Widowed	Separated	Divorced
All Ages	3382729	1754552	1323197	293475	6956	4549
0-9	539693	0	539693	0	0	0
10-14	300984	6113	294472	299	84	16
15-19	303732	27402	275753	391	147	39
20-24	320146	169039	149428	1011	465	203
25-29	299035	260121	35437	2360	717	400
30-34	275104	259266	9382	5098	817	541
35-39	259736	244599	4268	9274	960	635
40-44	223291	204892	2744	14169	839	647
45-49	197486	174510	1952	19729	759	536
50-54	164963	136649	1507	25730	634	443

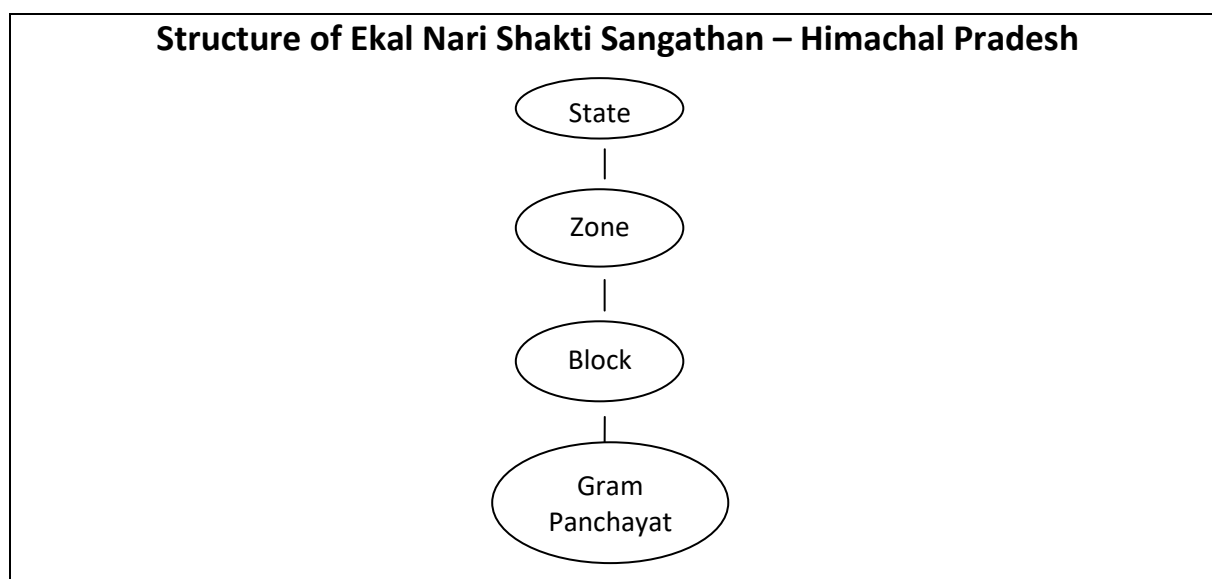
55-59	131615	101523	1101	28226	443	322
60-64	115908	74151	1442	39574	445	296
65-69	80220	43891	1378	34548	239	164
70-74	68468	26714	808	40617	213	116
75-79	39266	12970	339	25800	86	71
80+	58272	10748	1037	46291	89	107
Age not stated	4810	1964	2456	358	19	13

Structure and membership of ENSS

ENSS is a membership based organisation for which the annual fee today is Rs.50. The basic activities are carried out at the gram panchayat level. Mobilisation of single women, providing information on rights, and helping them access social security schemes is carried out at this level. Above this is the block level where meetings are held four times in a year. Three women from each gram panchayat are selected to attend these meetings. Members exchange information here. Information about various schemes and rights is given and members also discuss problems affecting their members. Above the block is the zone. Zonal meetings are held twice a year. Up to four women from each block participate. Here the activities for the block are planned and presentation is made about the block which is presented at the state level meeting. At the state level meeting, government functionaries of relevant departments and representatives of NGOs are also invited. This provides a chance to discuss issues and exchange information.

In 2012, Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan was registered in Himachal Pradesh as Ekal Naari Vikas Evam Kisan Kalyan Samiti. However the forum is still known as Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan. For purposes of this paper, ENSS will be used.

Figure 1: Structure of Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan



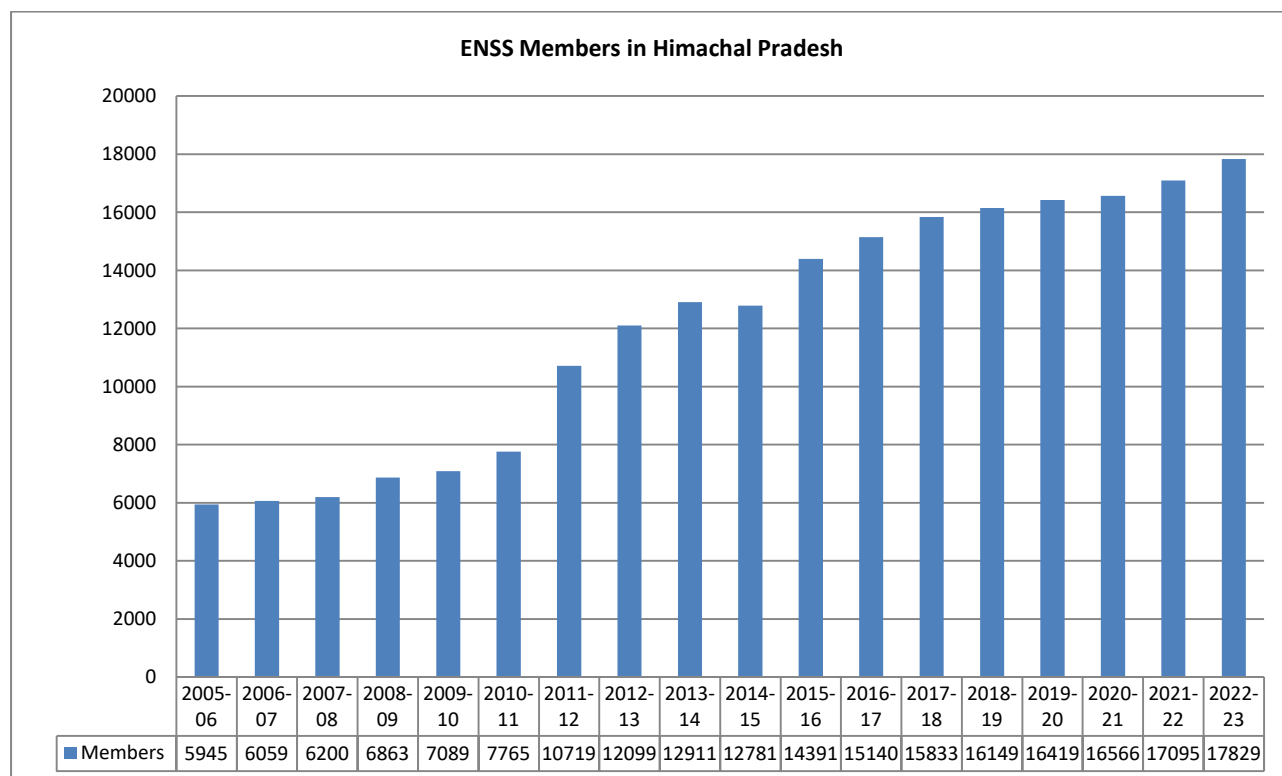
Current Status of ENSS

While ENSS came into being in October 2005, single women had started mobilising women ever since they got back from the ENSS meeting in Rajasthan in 2004. By 31 March 2006 ENSS Himachal had 5945 members. In 2015 office-bearers of ENSS decided that they would work towards including more members in the existing districts rather than expanding to newer districts. ENSS is carrying out activities in 21 blocks in the districts of Bilaspur, Chamba, Kangra, Mandi, Sirmour, Solan and Una. The organisation works at the grassroots. It has covered 516 gram panchayats and has formed 716 community-based organisations.

Table 2: Spread of ENSS in Himachal Pradesh till 31 March 2023

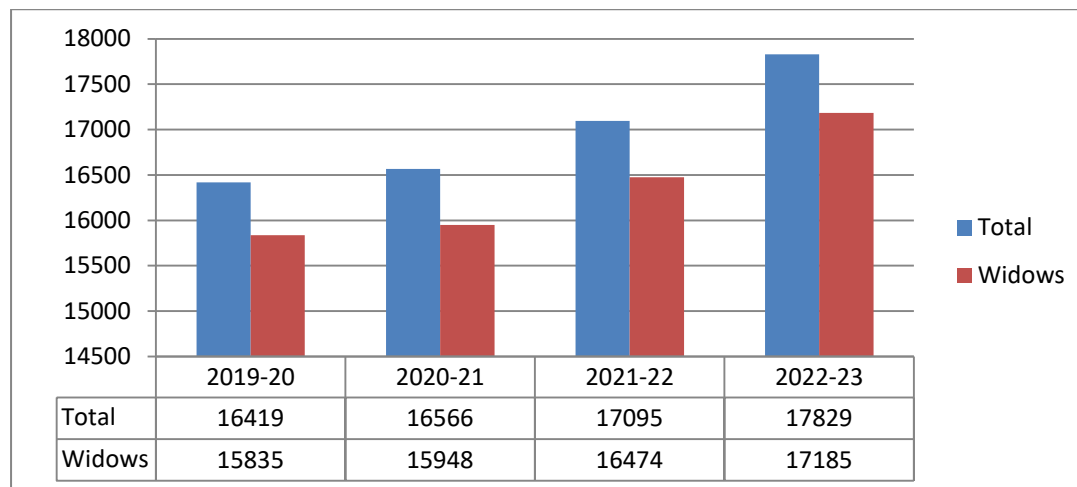
Districts	7
Blocks	21
Gram panchayats	516
CBOs	716
Members	17829

Figure 2: Membership from year 2005-2023*



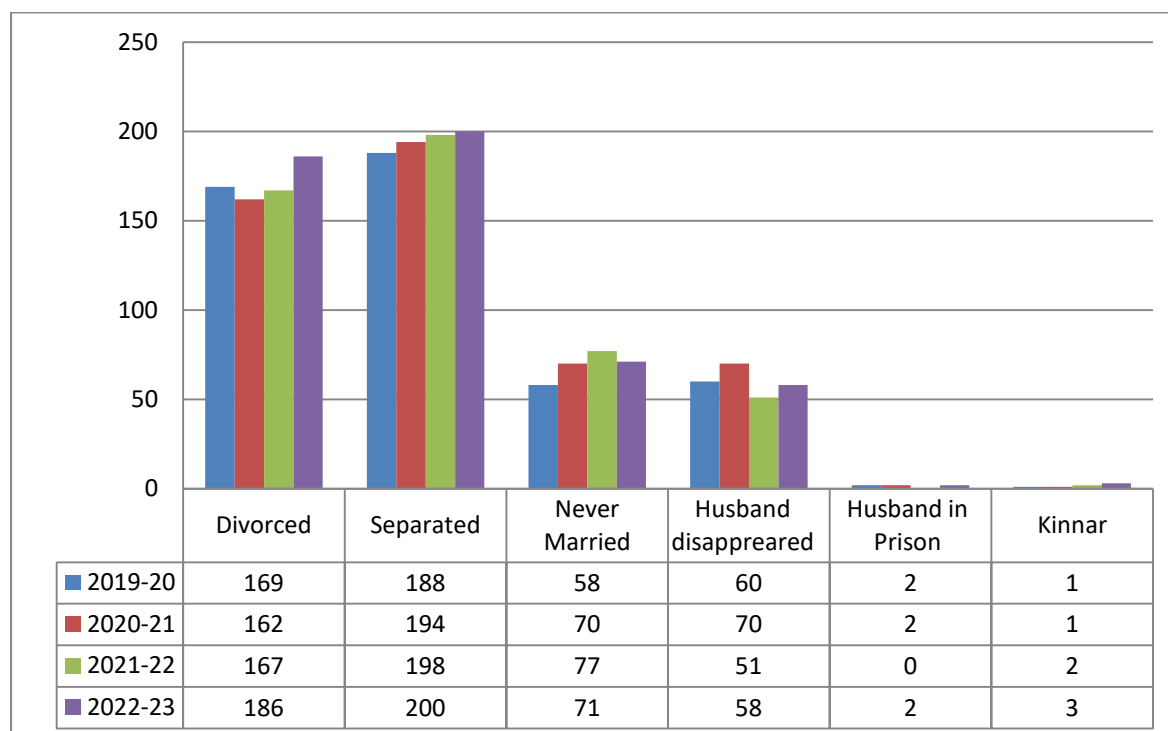
*Year ending on 31st March for all years

Figure3: Total members and number of widows from 2019 – 2023*



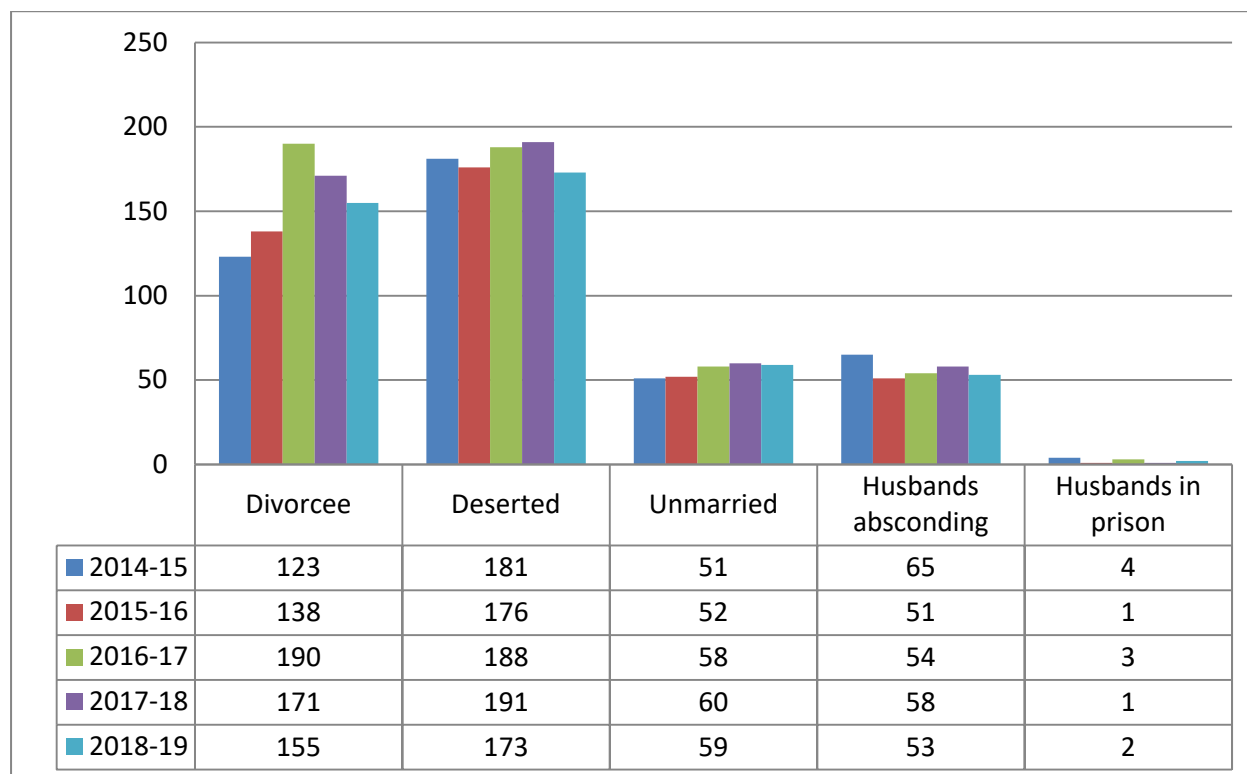
*Year ending on 31st March for all years

Figure 4: ENSS Members who are divorced, deserted, unmarried, whose husbands have disappeared, husbands are in prison and are *kinnar*; Year 2019-23*



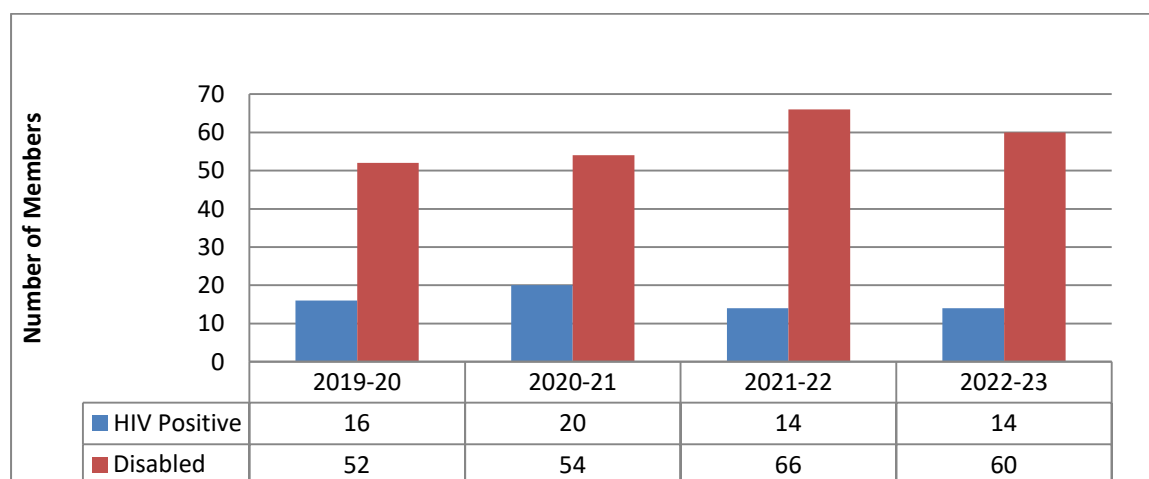
*Year ending on 31st March for all years

Figure 5: ENSS Members who are divorced, deserted, unmarried, whose husbands are absconding and husbands are in prison; Year 2014-19*



*Year ending on 31st March for all years

Figure 6: Number of members who are HIV+ and disabled: 2019-2023*



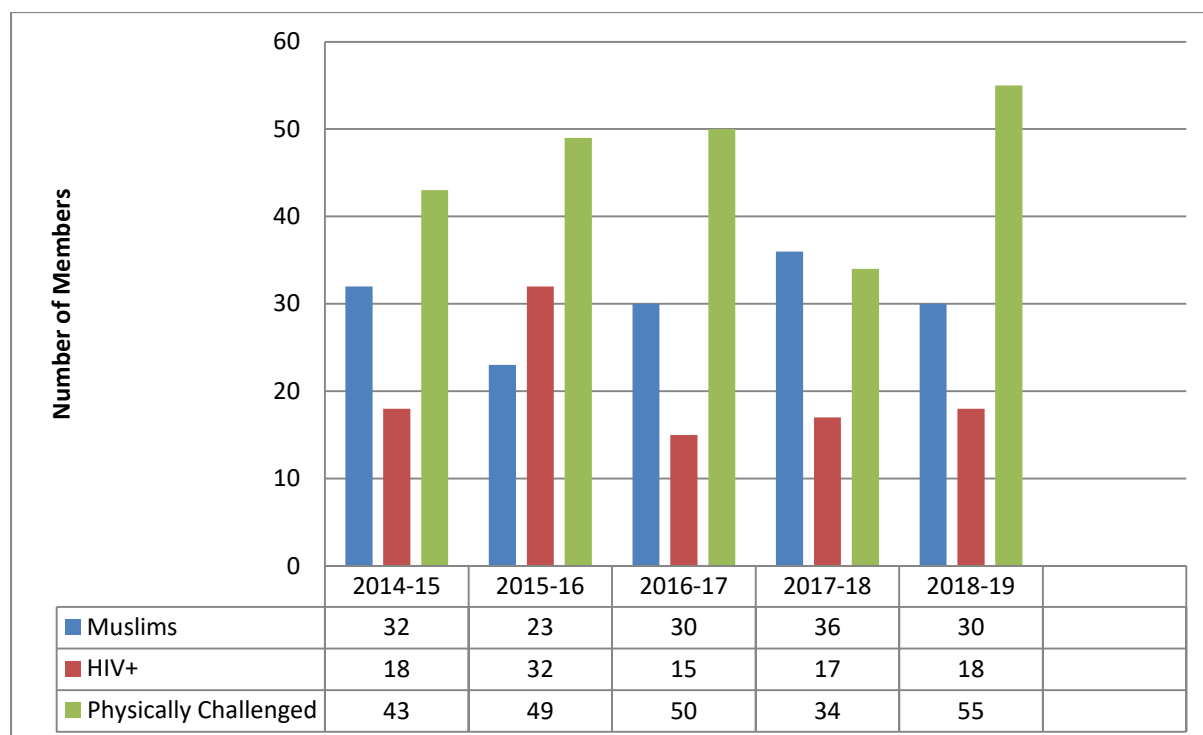
*Year ending on 31st March for all years

Table 3: Number of Dalit and Muslim members, 2019-2023*

Year	Dalit	Muslim
2019-20	5870	38
2020-21	5584	41
2021-22	6089	46
2022-23	6894	50

*Year ending on 31st March for all years

Figure 7: Number of Muslim, HIV+ and Physically Challenged ENSS Members*



*Year ending on 31st March for all years

THE IMPACT OF EKAL NARI SHAKTI SANGATHAN

ENSS has made a substantial difference to the lives of single women. This has been through working at various levels from the individual to the policy level. This includes working with single women to make them feel empowered, working at the community level, with local bureaucracy and influencing state policy on single women. The impact of ENSS has been categorised under three sections – 1) access to social security schemes and other entitlements, 2) empowerment of single women, and 3) advocacy for rights and visibility of single women.

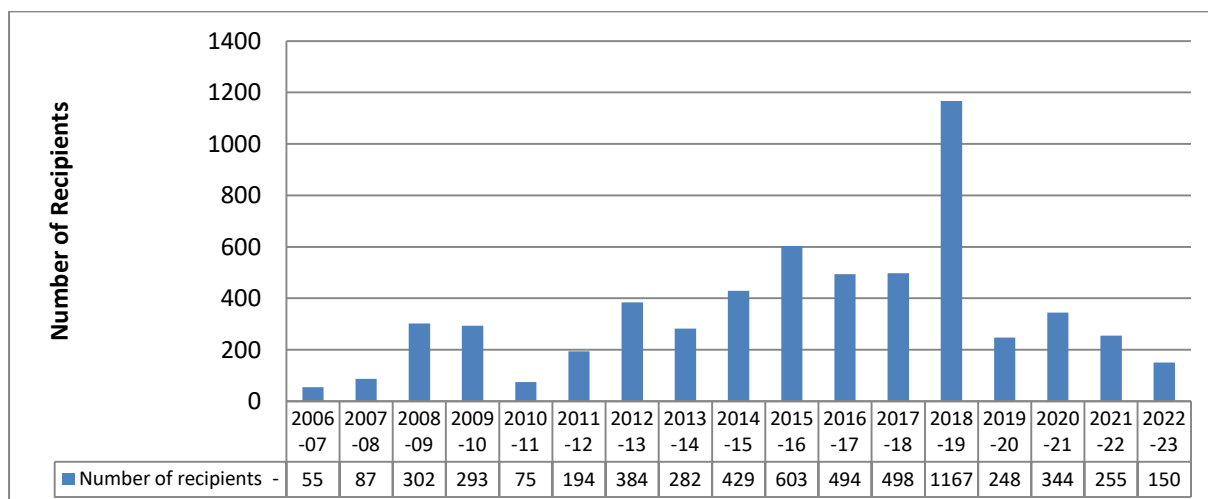
Access to Social Security Schemes and Other Entitlements

One of the biggest achievements of ENSS in Himachal Pradesh has been to help single women receive welfare entitlements under various social security schemes. Before ENSS was established, single women found it difficult to get access to social schemes such as widowhood pension or other entitlements due to them. As single women, they formed a very vulnerable category and did not have the capacity to confront local officials or follow-up their cases with the panchayat or the local bureaucracy. As single women got mobilised under ENSS, activists in the field along with single women from the community started to follow-up cases where women had not received pensions. They also helped other single women to apply for the same. Over the years ENSS has helped single women apply for various social security schemes that the government has introduced.

Pension to widows

Before the formation of ENSS, widows found it difficult to receive pensions which they were entitled to. It would take many months or even years for women to get pension, unless the family knew someone in the panchayat or bureaucracy. Now widows no longer have to struggle to get the pension. In the few cases where there has been a delay in getting pension, ENSS has raised the issue in public hearing that are held at the development block level.

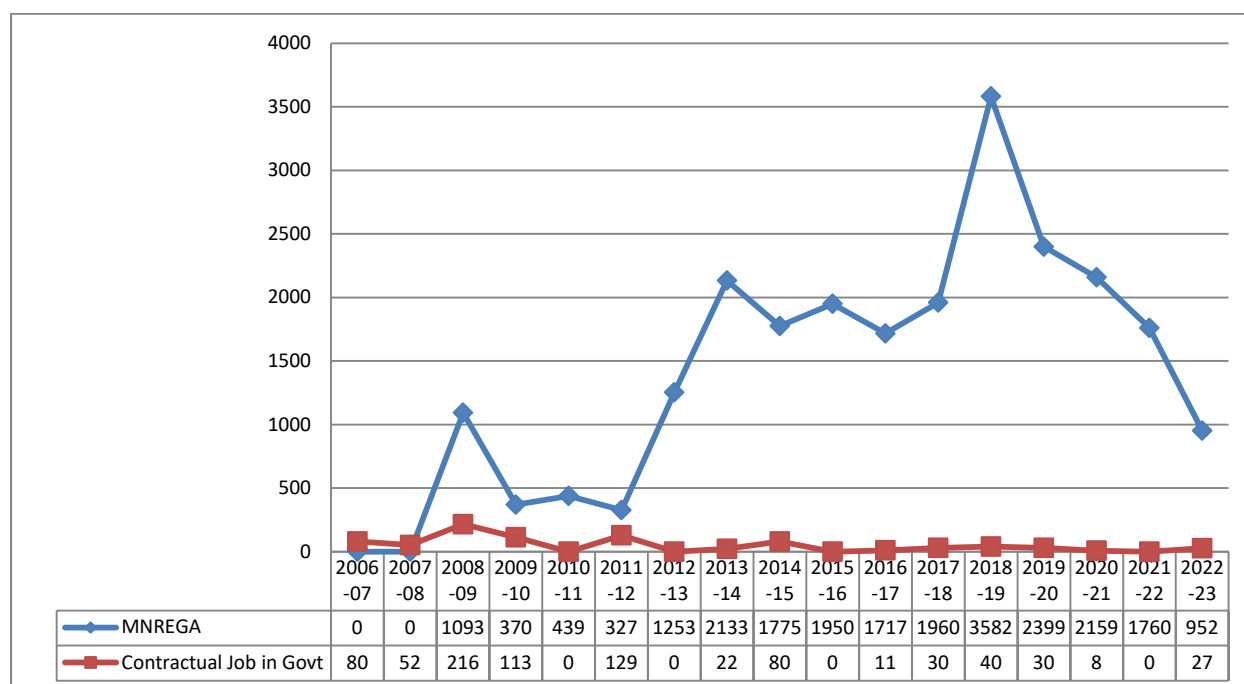
Figure 8: Number of ENSS members who received their pensions from the government 2006-23



Employment

One of the biggest problems that single women face is lack of employment. This was found to be true for both rural and urban areas. The government is supposed to consider single women for contractual jobs such as *anganwadi* helper, water carrier, etc. wherever a vacancy emerges. ENSS has helped women to apply for such posts. The organisation has also encouraged and assisted women to enrol in MNREGA so that they may get work for at least 100 days.

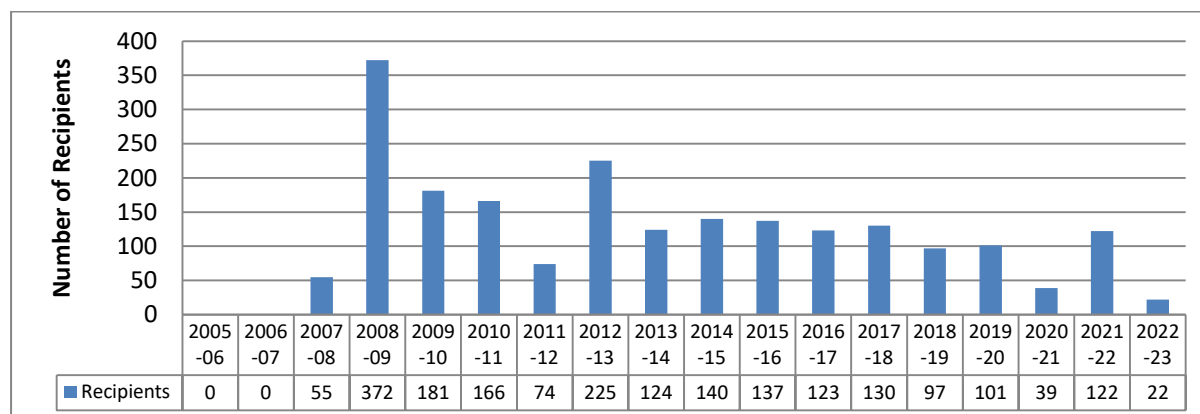
Figure 9: Number of members who got a contractual government job and enrolled in MNREGA, 2006-23



Mother Teresa Scheme

The Mother Teresa scheme provides financial aid per child to destitute women not having more than two children. The children should be studying in a recognised school.

Figure 10: Mother Teresa Scheme recipients, 2006-23

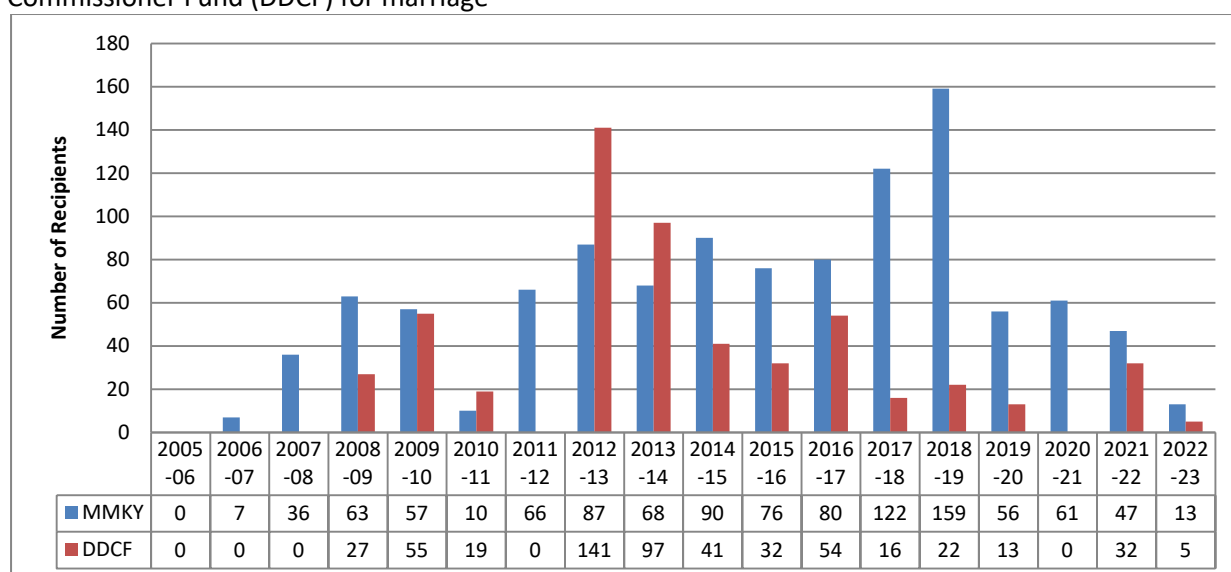


Grants for wedding

The Mukhya Mantri Kanyadan Yojana (MMKY) in Himachal Pradesh gives financial assistance to orphaned girls, and daughters of widows, destitute women, families below the poverty-line (not earning more than Rs.35,000 per annum) for their marriage. The girl getting married should be over 18 years of age. This scheme started in 1989.

The District Deputy Commissioner Fund (DDCF) for marriage is a grant given to encourage widow remarriage. It was started in 2004. The Deputy Commissioner, Social Justice & Empowerment department, can sanction Rs. 25.000 to bona fide Himachali men and women who are above the age of 21 years and 18 years respectively & who are not above the age of 50 years at the time of wedlock.

Figure 11: Those receiving Mukhya Mantri Kanyadan Yojana (MMKY) and District Deputy Commissioner Fund (DDCF) for marriage



Minor household assets

The government also provides minor household assets for the economically marginalised. This includes sewing machines, LPG cylinder for cooking and solar light. Below are number of ENSS members who received these assets. Of these, sewing machines have been provided by the government for the longest time. Solar lights and gas cylinder were introduced recently.

Figure 12: Number of members who received sewing machines, 2006-15

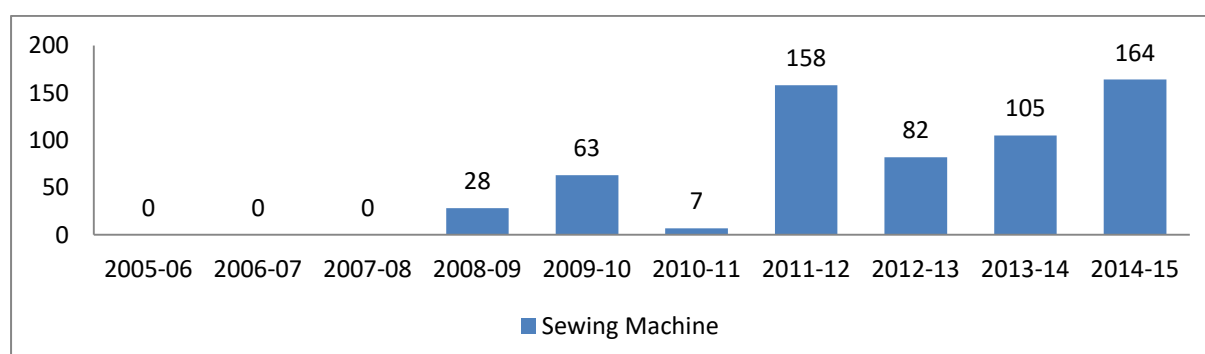
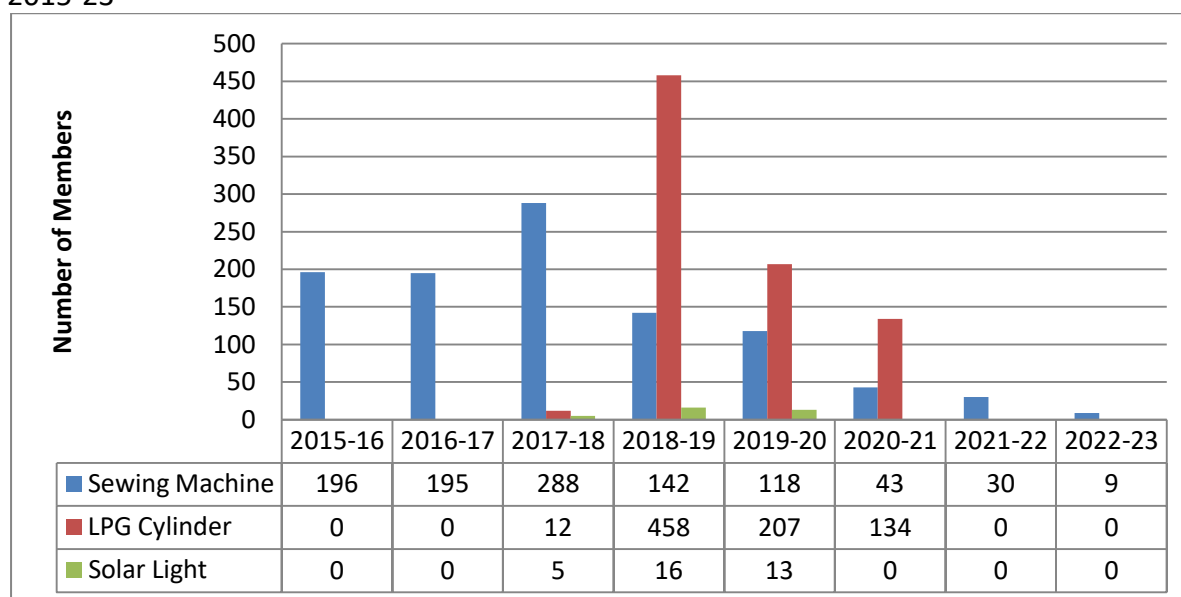


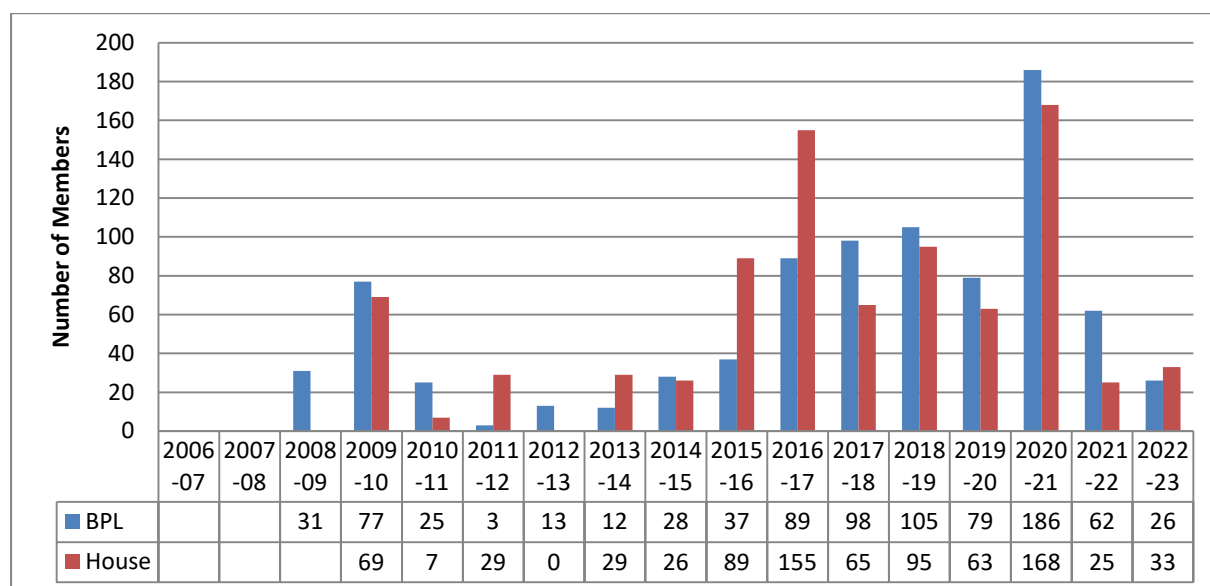
Figure 13: Number of members who received sewing machine, LPG cylinder and solar light, 2015-23



BPL cards and grant for house construction

The number of ENSS members who got below poverty line (BPL) cards and grant for house construction from 2006 to 2023.

Figure 14: Those given BPL card and grant for house construction, 2006-23



Recent schemes

Since 2015, some new schemes have been introduced. The government introduced a government health insurance scheme, which has to be renewed every three years. For single women, the insurance premium is very low. Grants for house repairs, the PM kisan and E-Shram card schemes were initiated very recently. ENSS is working towards getting

their members enrolled in these schemes. Given below are the number of members enrolled till 31st March 2023.

Figure 15: ENSS members enrolled for health insurance, received grants for house repair, enrolled in PM-Kisan and E-Shram.

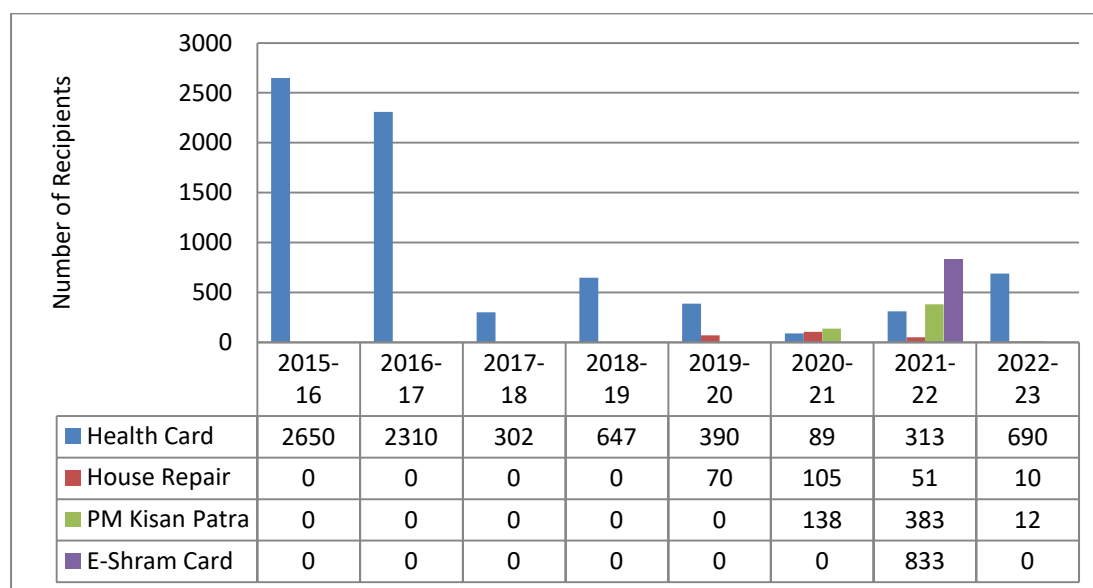


Table 4: Total ENSS members who have availed various welfare schemes

Scheme	Total ENSS recipients	Time period
Pension	5860	2006-2023
MNREGA	23869	2008-2023
Contractual government job	838	2006-2023
Mother Teresa scheme	2108	2007-2023
MMKY	1098	2006-2023
DDCF	554	2008-23
Sewing machine	1628	2008-2023
LPG cylinder	811	2017-2023
Solar light	34	2017-2023
BPL card	871	2008-2023
House construction	853	2009-2023
Health card	7391	2015-2023
House repair	236	2019-2023
PM Kisan patra	533	2020-2023
E-Shram card	833	2021-2023

Grants from other sources

ENSS in Himachal Pradesh has been trying to gather funds from other sources too. ENSS has been contacting temples in different districts to provide financial help to single women.

Table 5: Number of ENSS members who received grants from temples

Year	Number of members	Year	Number of members
2005-06	-	2015-16	38
2006-07	-	2016-17	69
2007-08	-	2017-18	63
2008-09	-	2018-19	24
2009-10	40	2019-20	42
2010-11	-	2020-21	20
2011-12	-	2021-22	15
2012-13	138	2022-23	6
2013-14	81		
2014-15	16		

Empowerment of Single Women

For single women, ENSS is a space where they meet others like themselves. Single women feel marginalised within the family and in the community. Single women, especially widows and those whose are separated from their husbands, are sidelined in celebrations and other social activities. This increases their feeling of exclusion. In ENSS, they meet others who are in a similar social and economic situation like them. This coming together has increased the self-confidence of single women.

Strength in coming together

Most importantly, women said that they gain strength from meeting women living with the same challenges. In talking to each other they are able to share their grief. Joining ENSS has helped them better cope with their circumstances. Single women said that their stress had reduced after joining ENSS.

For single women, joining ENSS has given them a feeling of empowerment. Members pointed out that ENSS is foremost a forum of women's empowerment. The women said that they were not aware of their rights and entitlements before joining. Getting to know of their rights has given them a sense of empowerment. They find it easier to assert themselves and demand for their rights in the family and the community. Because of ENSS women said that they could find a resolution of their issues. They further pointed out that nobody listens to the poor especially for issues pertaining to land/property rights.

As mentioned above, ENSS has helped single women get their entitlements under welfare schemes of the government. As single women came together under the banner of ENSS, they were not only able to demand their entitlements, they also became aware of various government schemes. At the same time, the panchayats and local bureaucracy also became aware of the activities of ENSS and that the organisation would not rest till all single women got their due.

Women said that they used to find it difficult to approach offices alone but as a collective it has become easier. 'Together we have put our demands to the government. We are heard when we go together. Now when we go to government offices, people know that we are 'Ekal Nari'.'

Attending the gram sabha

ENSS has also made women aware of the need to participate in gram sabha meetings in the panchayat. Usually it is men of the family who attend these meetings. It is at these panchayat meetings that information about government schemes is given to the community. However single women were not attending these meetings even though no one else from the house was going. And therefore they would not get to know about schemes of the government. ENSS has made single women aware of the necessity to attend the gram sabha. For women this also meant overcoming a cultural barrier. Now single women go together to attend gram sabha meetings in the panchayat. And since women go together in a group, they find it easier to attend it.

Alternate celebrations

Single women face many social restrictions on how to dress and what colours to wear. It is socially not acceptable for single women to wear brightly coloured clothes. They are not supposed to wear jewellery, apply make-up or apply henna (*mehendi*). This specially applies to widows. People in the community pass comments if a single woman dresses well. The presence of widows is seen as inauspicious in events such as marriages. Widows are sidelined in celebrations in the household and not invited for celebrations in the community. This discrimination against widows is more among the upper castes. When single women joined ENSS, they felt they needed days to celebrate and enjoy themselves. ENSS has been organising events where members from various village get together. Members of ENSS now celebrate events like international widow day on 23rd June where they dress up well and dance.

Members of ENSS have been celebrating the festival of 'Behen dooj' (sister's festival) since 2013. The festival of 'Bhai Dooj' or celebrating your brother is held two days after Deepavali. This festival has been transformed into celebrating sisterhood by single women. This celebration started when in a meeting of ENSS Dr. Sanjay Srivastav asked the women what they receive from their brothers for Raksha Bandhan and Bhai Dooj. Most members said that they get Rs. 101 or Rs. 51 and in rare cases Rs. 501. Dr. Srivastav asked the women whether they get their share in ancestral property. The women immediately replied that if they ask for their share in property, it would mean the end of festivals of Raksha Bandhan and Bhai Dooj. In the discussion that ensued, women realised that for a few rupees they were forsaking their own support system. Women decided to create their own friendship

bond and decided to celebrate Behen Dooj (festival of sisterhood). This became a path-breaking idea which challenged the patriarchal notion that the brother is their 'Rakshak' or protector. The members decided to become the supporter and 'Rakshak' for each other.



ENSS members celebrating Behen Dooj.



The celebration of Behen Dooj by ENSS members has also been covered in the local press.

Single women also used to feel very left out on the occasion of 'karwa chauth' when married women keep a fast for their husband's long life. ENSS members now get together on 'karwa chauth' to celebrate, when they dress up in bright clothes, wear bangles, apply heena on their palms (which widows are not supposed to do) and sing and dance. For single women, these events are the few occasions where they can celebrate.

Greater community role

At a few places members told us that they have also mediated in marital disputes within the panchayat. This is due to the stature that Ekal Nari has acquired in the community.

Self-help groups initiated by ENSS

ENSS has also started some self-help groups, to help single women financially. These were started in the year 2014. These SHGs operate their accounts independently.

Table 6: Number of Self-help groups (SHGs) started for ENSS members

S.No	District	Block	Year of formation	Name of SHG	Members	Contribution per month	Total amount
1	Sirmaur	Paonta	2014	Jamna	12	20/50	80,640
2	Sirmaur	Paonta	2014	Shimla Dhara	8/6	10/50	46,080
3	Sirmaur	Paonta	2015	Kamru	10	20	16,800
4	Sirmaur	Paonta	2015	Sautan	11	100	92,400
5	Sirmaur	Paonta	2015	Matla	8	20	13,440
6	Sirmaur	Paonta	2020	Tatyana	15	10	3,600
7	Sirmaur	Paonta	2022	Baladaa	7	10	840
8	Sirmaur	Paonta	2022	Samapamta	6	10	720
9	Una	Gagrat	2015	Jal Shakti	10	20	16,800
10	Una	Gagret	2015	Bhagwati	16	50/100	67,200
11	Solan	Kunihar	2018	Dhundan	12	50/100	50,400
12	Solan	Kunihar	2016	Nauni	11	100	79,200
13	Bilaspur	Sadar	2016	Naina Devi	15	180/20 50/100	48,600
14	Bilaspur	Sadar	2016	Jalpa	10	50/100	30,000
15	Bilaspur	Sadar	2016	Nauni	10	50	36,000
	Total				159		582,720

Capacity building programmes

Over the years, ENSS has carried out many types of training programmes and workshops annually. These have been related to developing life skills and skills that could be used for economic activities.

- Training for ENSS activists on spreading awareness, mobilisation and changing the self-perception of the single women in the area.
- Training of ENSS activists on the functioning of nyaya (justice) panchayats
- Leadership training and capacity building of ENSS block level members
- Training of ENSS members on livelihood generation activities such as book keeping, candle making, etc.
- Workshop for ENSS members on gender construction in society
- Self-defense camps for ENSS members

- Legal information workshops regarding violence against women for members
- Camps on awareness on government schemes
- The importance of participating in Mahila Gram Sabha and Gram Sabha and collective bargaining

Advocacy and Visibility

ENSS has since the beginning been advocating for the rights and visibility of single women. The biggest mobilisation was in April 2008, when Nirmal Chandel of ENSS led a march to Shimla to present their demands to the chief minister of the state.



Chief Minister Mr. Prem Kumar Dhumal addressing single women when the march reached Shimla, 3rd April 2008.

Jan Sunwai (Public Hearings)

ENSS Himachal has been organising public hearings regularly to solve issues faced by single women. These hearings are organised at the block level. These are held in every block in which ENSS is working every year. Members of the bureaucracy are invited to these public hearings where single women voice their individual problems regarding access to entitlements and the issue is addressed by the various department officials. The Covid 19 pandemic had impacted these hearings since they could not be organised from April 2020. These have started again since the lockdown was lifted.

Engaging with government departments

ENSS has been having meetings with government departments. In these meetings, issues faced by single women working in various departments have been raised, especially the front-line workers.

Photo 2: Nirmal Chandel receiving '**Women Transforming India**' award from Niti Aayog in 2016

Nirmal Chandel the state co-ordinator of the Ekal Nari Shakti Sangathan in Himachal Pradesh was selected as one of the top six '**Women Transforming India**' by Niti Aayog in 2016. She was one of the twelve selected from among 1000 contestants in India for her work on impacting policies and budgets regarding widows and deserted women.



Engagement with political parties

ENSS Himachal has also been engaging with political parties in the state to raise awareness about the situation of single women. ENSS presented a list of demands of single women to all political parties before the state elections in November 2020.

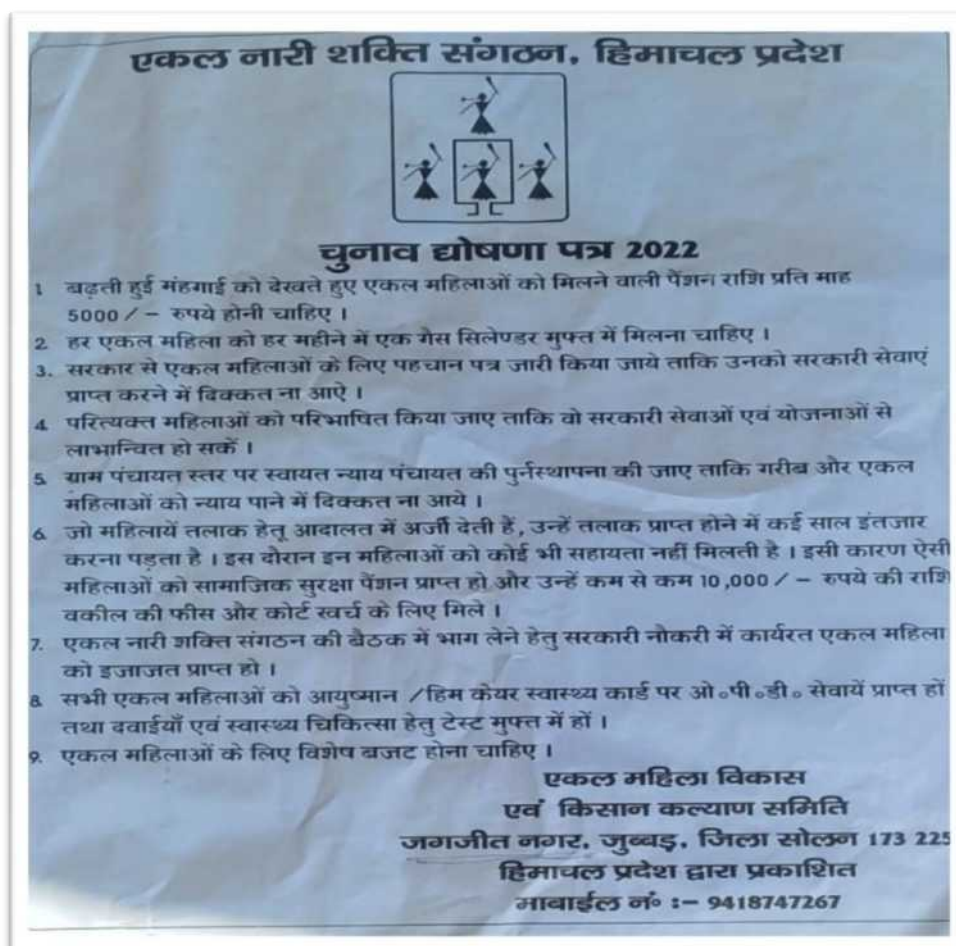
List of demands - November 2022.

1. Since the cost of living has gone up, increase the pension for single women to Rs. 5000 per month.
2. Every single woman should be given a free gas cylinder for cooking every month.
3. State government should give identity cards to single women so that they may

access government schemes easily.

4. Separated women should be defined and recognised by the government so that they may receive benefits of government welfare schemes.
5. 'Nyaya panchayats' should be set up at the gram panchayat level to help single women and the poor get justice easily.
6. It takes many years for divorce to be granted after it is filed in court. During this period, women do not get any assistance from the government. Such women should be given welfare assistance and should be given Rs.10,000 to pay the lawyer and for court fees.
7. All single women working with the government should be given time off to attend ENSS meetings.
8. All single women should be given access to O.P.D. under the Ayushman/Himcare health schemes. They should also be given free medicines and diagnostic services.
9. There should be a separate allocation for single women in the budget.

Photo 3: Copy of List of demands in Hindi to presented to all political parties before state elections in Himachal Pradesh in November 2022



CURRENT SITUATION OF SINGLE WOMEN

This section is based on the fieldwork carried out between September and November 2022 in various districts of Himachal Pradesh. Focused group discussions and interviews were carried out with activists and members of ENSS. The social, economic and political context has changed in part due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Other factors have also changed the social milieu. Therefore this is a timely analysis of the issues affecting single women.

Social Issues

Stigma

Widows' presence is viewed as inauspicious. Even now in many places widows do not participate in auspicious events and celebrations at home, even if it was their own son's wedding. They are supposed to take a back seat. All the ceremonies are to be done by married women. However now in many places widowed mothers insist on conducting all ceremonies. In one case one widowed mother said she would perform all the rituals. At that point some other widows tried to dissuade her. But she said, that it was her son's wedding and that she would do it. In religious ceremonies too, she carried out rituals that widows don't normally do. She said that "this is a religious ceremony, is it my fault that I am widowed?" This lady is associated with ENSS. But such women are rare.

Where ENSS is present, single women are in a better position. But where ENSS is not there, women face a lot of restrictions. In another case, an ENSS activist reported that "my mother who is old and is a widow had gone to the neighbour's house for a wedding. At the time of the bride's departure she was pushed behind deliberately because she is a widow."

Activists reported that earlier people used to say "we have seen the face of this widow in the morning (*ham ne subah is rand ka munh dekh liya*)". Now no one talks like that. Activists said that they tell widows that if anyone says anything derogatory to them, they should tell us, we will talk to them. Many activists reported that many widows themselves say that they don't want to be in the forefront of social and religious ceremonies as people will pass comments.

Sexual harassment

Single women face a lot of sexual harassment both within the community and outside. Women reported that if they dress well or wear a bright colour, the men in the community pass sexual comments on them. Single women also reported facing harassment in the workplace.

Case study 1 – Reena

We were told by the ENSS activist that Reena stays away from social gatherings. It was the first time she had come to a meeting of ENSS when we were there. It took a lot of persuasion to convince Reena to come to this meeting.

Reena's father died when she was very young and she comes from a very poor family. At the time of her wedding her brother was young. Her mother was very worried about fulfilling her responsibility, and hence did not enquire much about the boy. Her husband was not earning steadily, but she was married to him none the less.

Reena's husband used to drink heavily and didn't earn regularly. He used to work with a *halwai* (one who makes sweets) off and on. Every time he would be in debt, he would run away or just disappear. She has two daughters and one son and lives in her husband's house.

Reena's husband disappeared 22 years ago. Today Reena is 52 years old. When he left 22 years ago, at first Reena was not surprised since this was not the first time he had gone away from home. Once before, he had gone away for two years without telling anybody and had never contacted the family. Thus she expected him to be back at some point and did not file a FIR report when her husband had gone missing. The family was hopeful that he would return this time too. However this time the wait has become 22 years.

The lack of a FIR report is creating problems. The property and house is in the name of her husband and cannot be transferred to her son's and her name because there is no FIR. Her husband's family consists of four brothers, and her husband's youngest brother is trying to get the land transferred to her son's and her name but due to the lack of any proof of her husband being missing, it could not be done. The *panchayat pradhan* says he is unable to do anything without an FIR or other documents, although the *pradhan* is very helpful and supportive.

After the disappearance of her husband, Reena started working in a factory to make both ends meet. She has not been able to avail any schemes for single women despite being single for the last 22 years. She has three children - one son and two daughters, whom she brought up on her own. Her two daughters are married now. She got her daughters married after they completed their secondary education. One daughter has started studying again after her marriage. Her son completed his B.Com and is now working in a factory.

Reena also faced harassment on many fronts. Whenever she wore nice clothes, people in the village would pass comments and question why and for whom she was wearing such nice clothes. Even when she was working in the factory, she faced sexual harassment from the foreman and other male colleagues.

When her son started earning he persuaded his mother to leave her job as he wants to take care of her and wants her to relax after so many years of hardship. Now she is thinking of getting her son married. Since leaving her job three years ago, she has started going to the Brahm Kumari centre and does meditation there. She said that she watches *Dharmik* (religious) programs on TV. She used to have high blood pressure but since she left her job, she feels better. Earlier she used to get very stressed out, partly because she was concerned about getting her daughters married. After getting her daughters married, she feels more relaxed. Reena stated emphatically that if a woman is educated and has some skills then she can stand on her own feet, this is very important.

The case of Reena brings up many issues. Women find that once their children are grown-up they are free of responsibilities. In an effort to overcome this vacuum, they turn to religious cults and sects for solace. This is more so for single women. These sermons are often the only way of dealing with stress and anxiety. The downside of joining religious cults is that it re-enforces patriarchal values. Joining religious cults is seen as a respectable way of spending time. This also makes it difficult for women to overcome patriarchy. For widows especially, and other single women who are not invited for social events, this is the only way of having a social life. Reena's case brings up another issue; that women even at the age of 50 are unable to give up the shackles of patriarchy. How a single woman dresses, how she spends time, etc. is very strictly governed by patriarchal norms.

Economic Issues

Widow pension

One of the biggest successes of ENSS has been ensuring that all widows get a pension. Everywhere we went, widows told us that they were getting widow pension. There is a lot of awareness about how to apply for pension and are getting it regularly.

However everywhere we were told that the pension should be increased since the cost of everything has gone up tremendously. Women get 1150 per month and the cost of a gas cylinder has also gone up to Rs.1100. The pension that single women are receiving is totally inadequate.

In this regard ENSS has been raising the issue with the government at many levels. It was also raised in the list of demands that was handed over to various political parties.

Employment opportunities

Another impact of the activities of ENSS has been that government contractual jobs such as multi-task worker, anganwadi helpers are given to single women. However such jobs are very few. In some places women had applied for a post many years ago and when a post came up after some years, it was given to a younger single woman. Some complained that those widows who are from better-off homes get the jobs while those who are really needy, have to wait for years, or after waiting for many years are declared over-age.

All women complained about the lack of employment opportunities. The only other opportunity for work is MNREGA. But not all women are able to take it up. The more elderly said that they were not given work in MNREGA. Women also said that there should be special programmes for women who are ill (HIV, cancer, etc) who cannot do manual work but can do other types of work.

Women can take up other jobs only in the industrial belt of the state. Even those living near urban areas find it difficult to get jobs as there are not enough available. Women were largely worried about leaving their in-laws house to find a livelihood for themselves due to the fear of being thrown out of the house and not being given property rights.

Lack of BPL cards

Many women complained that while they qualify for the BPL category, their names cannot be included because the BPL quota is already full. The panchayat pradhan tells most women that they should suggest whose name should be removed. Women say they are unable to suggest anyone's name. In all places single women complained that there are families that have vehicles at home but are in the BPL list. And single women who really need help are unable to get it. Women complained that those who really need a BPL card cannot get it while well-off households have it.

Administrative Issues

Lack of quorum in the gram panchayat

Many times women said that their applications were not accepted by the gram sabha because the quorum of the gram sabha was not complete. Sometimes the women are told to get more people to complete the quorum. Thus there are delays in even applying for schemes like pension that are their basic right.

Name in Parivar Register

When a woman gets married, her name is removed from the family or 'parivar' register in her parents panchayat. Her name is then to be added to the parivar register in her marital home. It has been seen that often her name is removed from her natal panchayat but has not been added in the panchayat in the marital panchayat. When the woman's name is not in the parivar register of her marital home, it leads to difficulties for the woman.

Many divorced and separated women are concerned that if their name is removed from the parivar register in their marital panchayat, it will also be removed from the patwari's register or land records and hence their children will lose all rights to their father's property. Therefore they do not want to remove their name from the parivar register. Since the name of the woman and her children are not registered in her native village panchayat where they are living, they cannot get any social security benefits.

Women who were married outside Himachal and return to their natal home face the maximum difficulties as the two panchayats are in different states. There have been cases where the panchayat of the marital home in Himachal has refused to add their name back in the register, even if their marriage has dissolved. Such women find it difficult to get the Himachal identity card too.

Problems of separated women

The situation of women who have separated is very bad as they are not able to apply for any social security schemes. This is because their name is removed from the panchayats of their natal homes on marriage. In some cases they have been living separately from their husbands for many years and the divorce has not been finalised. In one case we found that the case had been pending for the last 18 years.

In many cases women are too poor to afford a lawyer's fee for divorce. Regarding legal aid, some women remarked that 'government lawyers don't do anything'. In some cases the divorce has been pending in the court for some years. There are many cases where women have been living in their parent's home for many years with their children without receiving any support for themselves or their children.

Health and Mental Health

Most women spoke of the anxiety and stress that they live with. Women shared how they have trouble sleeping. They are stressed about the future of their children and how to make ends meet. Mental health issues came up in all discussions. Many women said that they suffered from blood pressure, headache, etc.

Women said that joining ENSS has helped them better cope with their circumstances. They are able to talk about their problems since everyone is in the same situation. They feel more confident when they come together. ENSS has also given them knowledge about their rights and helped them access schemes.

The government has recently reduced the fee for the HIM-CARD which is a health insurance card of the state government for single women. This provides insurance for cashless in-patient treatment for up Rs. Five lakh. But again women whose names are not registered in panchayats where they are living are unable to get this card.

Participation in Panchayats

ENSS has been encouraging members to attend the gram sabha. In many places women have been going regularly for gram sabhas because of the efforts of ENSS. Customarily the gram sabha is mostly attended by men of the family. It is important for single women to attend it since it falls on them to attend and know what all is happening in the panchayat. Single women said that they find it easier to go together as a group.

Case study 2 – Anita

My husband died of AIDS. He was a driver. And I too started falling ill after he died. My sister-in-law did not behave well with me. Because I was ill my parents used to come frequently to check on me. My aunt and cousins would also come. My sister-in law used to get angry about why are so many people coming constantly. She would serve me food in different vessels. Then my father came to take me. We got tests done in many places. Ultimately we went to Shimla. There they did the tests again. They called the whole family and also told us to get my husband's reports. But my husband's family had burnt all the reports after his death. In Shimla they told us that I was HIV positive but my daughters were negative. For two years I and my daughters stayed in my father's house. I was very ill. I used to keep vomiting after taking the medicines. I got better after two years. Then I decided to come back to my in-laws house to stay. My husband's brother has a separate household. But I left my daughters with my parents. This happened about 15 years ago. Now I am getting widow pension. But it took me eight years to get pension. I get 3500 for three

months. I did not get pension for eight years because they wrote the family income as 75000 per annum. That is the income of the whole family but my husband's brother lives separately. After eight years they changed the annual income to less than 35000 per year.

Because of my ill-health I cannot work in MNREGA. I cannot do any heavy work. The government should give pension to widows of HIV patients irrespective of income. Now even the gas cylinder has become Rs.1100. And I get 3500 for three months. It is very difficult to manage in this amount.

THE WAY FORWARD

ENSS has come a long way since it started in 2005. Single women now have a platform to air their grievances. Since they now are part of a collective they feel empowered. ENSS has had a big impact on the lives of single women all over Himachal Pradesh, not just in areas where they are active. This has been possible due to the support that ENSS has received from the government of Himachal. The government has acted on the issues raised by single women since the beginning. Officials from the government of Himachal Pradesh attended the first convention of single women in 2005. The chief minister of the state also met representatives of single women when ENSS held a march in 2008 and immediately issued instructions to look into the pending cases of single women.

While ENSS has been working consistently for empowering single women, it has to be kept in mind that this is has to be a continuous process. And even though social and cultural norms are changing, and single women have more freedom than before, social change takes time. Single women have come a long way due to the efforts of ENSS, however the degree of change is not the same everywhere.

Challenging patriarchy

ENSS has been working for the entitlements of single women which is the primary concern of single women. This concerns their survival. Over the years ENSS has worked hard to make welfare schemes accessible to single women.

However the organisation has not been able to focus equally on issues of patriarchy that underlie attitudes towards single women and affect their rights. In other words, ENSS has been addressing the practical gender needs of single women, but has not addressed the strategic gender needs that stem from patriarchy.

Single women as agents of social change

The largest percentage of single women are widows over the age of 50 whose children are married or working. Many women decide to stop working outside the home at this age. This category of women suddenly find that they have a lot of time to spare. They often join religious sects/cults which reaffirm patriarchal ideology.

ENSS should consider how single women over 50 can be change agents in the community for promoting women's rights and overcoming patriarchy. This category of women also have a standing in the community by virtue of their age. They have much more time to spare and are full of energy. These women have overcome a lot of hardship and have wisdom to share.

Lack of land ownership for housing

Most women do not own land. In many cases women are not given land by the family even if they are legally entitled. Dalit communities in general own less land. So while the government gives a grant to build a house, Dalit single women are often unable to acquire a roof over their head. This issue needs to be addressed.

Increase in widow pension

Women are receiving widow pension but its amount needs to be raised. In all areas women complained that the cost of everything had gone up. Most women receive 1150 per month while the cost of a gas cylinder is Rs.1100.

In most cases widows started receiving pension after six months to one year of giving the application in the panchayat. And they did not receive pension for the months of waiting.

Need for jobs/economic activities

Members have pointed out that there are not enough jobs for women. The few contractual jobs such as water carrier, anganwadi helper are few as compared to the number of women needing them. In addition they go to younger women. Single women constantly said that they needed income generating activities. There is a need to have income generating activities/ SHGs through ENSS. This issue was raised in all discussions.

In one of the meetings, we had met officials from the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM). ENSS has to look into these issues and make links with relevant departments to help single women.

Parivar register issues

In the case of many woman, their names are not registered in the parivar register of the panchayat of the marital home, while it is removed from her natal panchayat soon after her marriage. Therefore when a woman returns to her natal home as a single woman, often her name does not appear in any panchayat. The single women is unable access any government schemes.

There have been cases where the panchayat has refused to re-enter her name despite a divorce. The issue is more difficult when the marriage has taken place in a different state as the panchayat often says that she is not a resident of Himachal even if she has spent all her life before marriage in the state and the rest of the family has a Himachal identity card (*Himachal praman patra*).

Mental health issues

Most women face a lot of stress, anxiety and depression. Joining ENSS has helped single women cope with stress and anxiety. Mental health issues need to be taken up on an organisational level. It has to be made an integral part of the ENSS activities. This requires a lot of discussion and planning and cannot be done immediately. However, ENSS should start to look for ways to include mental health issues.

Sexual and reproductive rights

ENSS has to focus on the sexual and reproductive rights of single women. This is an area that has not been addressed by ENSS in the context of single women.

Economic activities for organisational strengthening

ENSS should consider helping single women in getting involved in economic activities and SHGs. It will help the organisation grow, make it stand on its feet and help in maintaining members' interest. Research has shown that groups are able to maintain membership and are more successful when there is economic activity involved.

Fund raising training

Given that ENSS activists face many problems in getting funds for even regular activities, they should be given training on various ways of gathering and generating funds.

Orientation programme for activists

Separate orientation programmes should be held for old and new ENSS activists. Older activists expressed that they have been working since the beginning ie 2005, and that they have developed a thought process. But it takes times to do so. New activists are likely to have social mores similar to the society in which they live. They need more orientation on gender sensitisation, panchayat meetings and government policies. They too need to feel empowered.

Workshops and booklets on rights and schemes for ENSS activists

Regular workshops should be done on issues of rights, policy changes, health issues etc. for activists. This will help keep them updated on such issues. There is a need to have booklets that tell about schemes and eligibility criteria. Booklets on legal and other rights in simple Hindi that can be understood by all should be developed.

Conclusion

ENSS has had a significant effect on the lives of single women in Himachal Pradesh. Its most significant impact has been to bring women who are single for various reasons together as a collective. This has given visibility and empowered single women on the ground.

ENSS has achieved a huge success in Himachal Pradesh since its inception in 2005. The organisation has spread rapidly in the state. Its membership increased from 6000 to nearly 18000. It should be noted that other states too have seen an increase in membership. But since Himachal Pradesh is a small state, it has been relatively easier.

ENSS has made a big difference to the lives of single women, especially in helping them access their welfare rights. Earlier women had to make several rounds to the panchayat and the local bureaucracy to get pension. Now it is more as a matter of routine. This has helped women even where ENSS is not active. ENSS has also helped women get other entitlements.

An important reason for its spread has been that collectivization of single women has given many women a forum to come together. Single women have been socially and economically marginalised. Berry (2014)² in her study of ENSS in Himachal points out that in a context where heteropatriarchal marriage is the standard, single women are suspected of being the bad woman as they are outside the symbolic protection of marriage. The single woman is viewed as being unconstrained sexually and hence sexually available. And therefore younger single women have to defend themselves physically from unwanted male advances.

The heteropatriarchal marriage is found among Brahmins and Rajputs. It is important to note that different parts of Himachal have different types of marriage systems. Women in other parts of Himachal traditionally have had the right to divorce and remarry. Customs such as 'reet' have traditionally existed in certain districts. However, with more men going to work in the plains, has meant that the patriarchal notions of the plains have had an influence on the more liberal mores of the state.

Older single women face other types of issues. With the rise in cash economy and break-up of the joint family, older women are not able to receive the care that was possible in the joint family. The situation of joint family dissolving is more in areas near commercial towns. Traditionally the family had looked after the aged. And in absence of a government policy for the care of the aged, this has created a difficult situation for senior single women.

² Berry, Kim (2014) Single but not Alone: the Journey from Stigma to Collective Identity through Himachal's Single Women's Movement. HIMALAYA: The Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies. Spring. Vol.34 No 1 Article 10.

One of the greatest achievements of ENSS has been to raise the issues of single women and make it part of mainstream discourse. The organisation has provided visibility to issues faced by single women. Ekak Nari is a well known term in the state. ENSS has worked relentlessly to bring up the issues of single women. There was a time when people did not like to have ENSS in the village. The big change came with the march that was taken out from Dharmi in Solan to Shimla in April 2008. Berry (2014) notes that this march produced a collective identity. The women had re-identified themselves as marginalised single women whose demands needed to be addressed. They were not there as a sister-in-law, mother, aunt, etc. The march by ENSS was also covered extensively by the state media and women gave interviews to the press. The CM himself came out to meet the march.

This march was a turning point in other ways too. Welfare schemes like widow pension, etc which were viewed as charity were reconfigured as a citizenship rights. Berry (2014) notes that ENSS members have rejected the idea of the dependent woman and now demand their rights as autonomous citizens. Today the rights of single women have been well established as a political right. In recent years political parties in India have learnt the importance of women's vote. Now across the country, state governments are increasing widow pension. But many issues of divorced and separated women are still unaddressed.

Berry (2014) has argued that by bringing different women under Ekak Nari, ENSS has been able to put together a new identity. ENSS has been able to move away from the sexualized good woman – bad woman dichotomy, however this too requires disciplining their actions.

ENSS has made a big impact by mobilising single women and making their needs a political issue in Himachal Pradesh. But many things need to be done to strengthen the collective and address the various needs of single women. Some of the challenges that ENSS has to address are:

- The need to challenge patriarchy that underlie attitudes towards single women and affect their rights. Single women, especially middle-aged can become change agents in the community for promoting women's rights and overcoming patriarchy.
- Lobby for land to build a house for single women. While the government gives a grant to build a house, a very large percentage of single women do not own any land, not even to build a room. This lack of land ownership is more among Dalits.
- Lobby for increase in widow pension, since the pension is a pittance. It is not sufficient to cover basic living costs.
- Single women of all ages need jobs and livelihood. This issue was raised everywhere. ENSS needs to look into this issue. The SHGs started by ENSS should be expanded.
- Adding name in the parivar register is a problem that divorced and separated women especially face when they return to their natal homes. If the name is not in the register, single women and the children are not able to avail any benefits.
- ENSS should start to look for ways to address mental health issues of single women.
- Sexual and reproductive rights of single women need to be addressed.
- Provide fund raising training to ENSS activists and members

- Regular workshops should be held and booklets on rights and schemes be taken out regularly for activists and members to keep them updated.

ENSS has made a big difference to the lives of single women, especially in helping them access their welfare rights. The organisation has also mainstreamed the issues of single women in policy matters. The changes brought about to the lives of single women is commendable. However ENSS should also look towards addressing the strategic gender needs of single women.