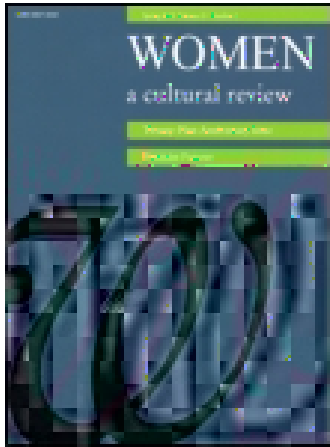


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### Listening to widows in rural India

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# Listening to Widows in Rural India

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THERE are about 33 million widows in India, representing 8 per cent of the total female population (Census of India 1991). The proportion of widows in the female population rises sharply with age, reaching over 60 per cent among women aged sixty and above. Despite the concentration of widows in older age groups, there are still a large number of widows below fifty years of age.

In spite of these numbers, relatively little is known about the actual living conditions of widows in India or what widows need and want. This article presents the voices of a cross-section of rural widows from nine states of India.

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remain one of the most controversial social issues in India (Oldenberg 1994)

married women above forty-five years of age. For India as a whole, Bhat found that mortality rates are 85 per cent higher among widows than among married women (Mari Bhat forthcoming).

~~What about widows who manage on their own? Analyzing income and~~

remain in their husband's village, and most of them do so. However, they are unlikely to receive much support from their in-laws. In effect, most North Indian widows are denied both the freedom to leave their husband's village, and the support they need to live there happily (Drèze and Sen 1995:174).

In my sample, 75 per cent of the widows lived in their husband's village at the time of his death. Of these widows, an overwhelming majority (88 per





Most fundamentally, the widows demanded dignity and respect, a positive social image and identity. This too is not an unreasonable demand, but it relates to the image and identity of women in general, and not only widows, in Indian society. This demand cannot be met through government legislation or intervention. The dignity, respect and positive social identity demanded by widows must be granted by Indian society at large.

*Transforming* The end of the workshon was marked by a very moving farewell ceremony.



possibility of creating a new identity for themselves and a sisterhood with other widows.

There is a need to create more opportunities for widows to come together and redefine their image as women with dignity and rights. And there is a need to create more opportunities for the society as a whole, as well as policy-makers, to listen to widows and hear their demands.

*Bibliography* Chen, Martha A. (ed.) (forthcoming), *Widows in India: Social Neglect and Public Action*, New Delhi: Sage.