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## Unwed Motherhood among Tribals in South India

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A qualitative inquiry was conducted to explore and document the lived experiences of being in unwed motherhood, their positions in the contexts of current relationships with their men, family and community. The analysis initially revealed that stigma produced and maintained diverse emotional and psychological responses. Second, families simultaneously remained as perpetrators of violence against unwed mothers and victims of extended stigma in tribal communities wherein family members were distanced, isolated and excluded from mainstream societal life. Further, stigma was extended to potential helpers such as peers and neighbours, resulting in social isolation and inadequate social support. Finally, due to perceived and actual experience of discrimination induced by stigma, unwed mothers enjoyed restricted physical mobility outside homes, community engagement and participation.

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### INTRODUCTION

The scheduled tribe population in India is 84.3 million, constituting 8.2% of the total population of India. Out of this, males are 42.6 million and females are 41.7 million, accounting for 8.01% and 8.40% of the total population (Census, 2001). There are 698 tribes with many overlapping communities in more than one state. As notified under Article 342 of the Constitution of India, tribes are spread over different states and Union Territories of India. Each tribe is associated with a specific geographic area whereas some are more dispersed than others (Tribal Development Plan, 2007; p-2). They settled down in their present natural habitats since pre-

historic times, mostly in the sparsely populated parts of hills and forests of sub-Himalayan and north-eastern regions, in the mountain belt of central India, between Narmada and Godavari rivers, and in the southern parts of the Western Ghats extending from Wayanadu, the present study site in Kerala to Kanyakumari district in Tamil Nadu” (Devasia, 2003).

The southern state of Kerala accommodates about 364,189 tribals who constitute 1.14% of the state’s population (Census, 2001). There are tribal groups in all districts of Kerala but the numerically significant groups are *Pulayans*, *Paniyans*, *Adiyans*, *Marratis*, *Malayarayars*, *Kurumas*, *Kuruchians* and *Irulas*. These tribes are found in significant numbers in Wayanadu, Idukki, Palakkadu and Kassargod districts. Among all these districts, Wayanadu has the highest number of tribal population, that is, 17.43% of the state tribal population (Aerthayil, 2008). The population in the district of Wayanadu was 7,80,619 in which 33,364 were scheduled caste people and 1,36,062 were scheduled tribes. This includes 67,394 males and 68,668 females. There are 2,643 scheduled tribe colonies accommodating around 31,125 scheduled tribal families, which spread over three administrative blocks namely Sultan Bathery, Kalpetta and Manathavadi of the district of Wayanadu (Department of Statistics, Kerala, 2006).

### **Tribal Women in Detribalising Tribal Society in India**

The tribal women in India, like in any other social groups, constitute about half the total population (Devasia, 2003). Unlike other social groups, tribal women occupy an important place in the socioeconomic structure of tribal society. Contrary to the practice of dowry, there exists a system of ‘bride price’ indicating a high social status enjoyed by the tribal women. Tribal women can divorce and remarry easily; they earn independently; and up to a great extent, they are economically independent. As compared to women belonging to other social groups in India, tribal women enjoy more freedom as traditional and customary tribal norms are comparatively more liberal to women (Basu, 1993). In tribal society, women are not treated as inferior or second class citizens. Although, they are on par with men, they complement rather than compete with each other (Dreze and Gazdar, 1997). However, the disturbing detribalisation trends in tribal societies such as gender equality, lower fertility and mortality patterns seemed to be gradually eroding, as they get more integrated into non-tribal society and their traditionally sustainable livelihoods are encroached upon (Maharatna, 2005).

Besides, the rural to urban migration of tribes have increasingly resulted in wearing down the sustainable tribal lifestyles (Maharatna, 2005). This is a consistent trend internationally observed on the experience of indigenous populations. An examination of health of the Mexican immigrants in the USA, has also revealed a similar pattern of 'acculturation' resulting in behaviour and lifestyles that adversely impacted health. For example, decreased fiber consumption in foods, decreased breastfeeding, and increase in consumption of cigarettes and alcohol especially by young indigenous women (James, 1993). This is well established through the rigors comparative analyses of political organisation, religion, ritual practices among the different tribes in India, that the status of tribal women is comparatively lower than that of tribal men (Chauhan, 1990). Moreover, the status of tribal women had gone from bad to worse due to the impact of social change which affected the tribal social structure (*ibid*).

A national level survey for the Indian Planning Commission revealed that 56% of these women were illiterate as against only 13% who were education upto the primary level. About 12% studied upto the middle school level whereas those who studied upto the 10<sup>th</sup> grade were only 7%. Only 6% of these women graduated, mostly in arts and commerce disciplines, and only about 1% were post-graduates (Devasia, 2003). Further, in Kerala, the studies showed that there is a marked difference between men and women in many critical socio-demographic variables leaving the women disadvantaged. The illiteracy rate for men was 32% and for women, 41%. Education at school level for boys was higher than girls. The reasons attributed were poor connectivity of tribal colonies with schools and their poverty contributed to their inadequate access to education beyond upper primary. These have resulted in excluding about one-fifth of tribal children from schooling in Kerala.

In Kerala, there were more widows (10%) than widowers (2%). Nearly half (45%) the women were unemployed whereas for men it was 32%. The average pay for men per day was Rs 68/- and for women, Rs 40/-. The frequent price rise of essential commodities and unequal pay for men and women have led to a lower quality of life for women than men (Aerthayil, 2008; p-136). Contrary to the previous notion that the tribal women were free to enter and re-enter into marital relationships, the study revealed that 11% of tribal women were widows. Another 0.5% were unmarried wherein all belonged to the upper age group of 31 years. About 8% of the participants were either divorced or separated; while another 4% were in living-together relationships.

This estimation may not be precise and may go even beyond the 4% in living together relationships since such an arrangement is subjected to societal stigmatisation (Devasia, 2003).

### **Structural Context of Tribal Exploitation in Kerala**

Viewing inequitable social interaction between tribes and non-tribes in Wayanadu from a historical perspective, the migration of farming communities from the erstwhile Travancore state during the 1950s to early 1970s for agricultural land has resulted in increased congregation of non-tribal migrant farming population in the tribal heartland of Wayanadu. This has resulted in long term impact on socioeconomic, political and cultural life of tribes in Wayanadu (Jose and others, 2011). The direct results of the migration were large-scale occupation of tribal habitats and forest lands by non-tribal migrant population. On the other side, tribes were increasingly displaced and were denied land and resources. Tribes who have hitherto developed the modern sense of ownership of land and resources could not maintain their ancestral lands and properties. The forest laws have further deprived the tribals of their livelihood in Wayanadu as these enactments have considerably restricted access to forest resources (Aerthayil, 2008; Jose and others, 2010a; and Jose and others, 2011b).

As a result, the tribes largely constitute the manual labourers working for the agricultural and allied activities of non-tribal farming communities in Wayanadu. This close cooperation in the economic and social realm of daily life has resulted in increased social exchange, social engagement and social interaction between the tribal and non-tribal rural communities. But such social exchange, social engagement and social interaction between the tribes and non-tribes were not on an equitable basis, thanks to the larger socioeconomic and political marginalisation faced by tribes at large in Kerala (Jose and others, 2011). In this scenario, the tribes were always at a disadvantage whereas the non-tribes who controlled the land and resources reaped advantages (Jose and others, 2010a; Jose and others, 2011a; Jose and others, 2011b).

The context of social interaction and exchange expose tribal women and girls to high risk sexual exploitation by non-tribal men. Social interaction and exchange controlled by dominant non-tribal social groups in Wayanadu, such as workplace, residence and schools made tribal girls and women the most vulnerable object of undue sexual advancement and exploitation (Jose and others, 2011b). This inequitable social interaction

and exchange determined by dominant social groups have resulted in many forms of residual disabilities in the socioeconomic, political and cultural life of the tribes in Wayanadu (*ibid*).

From a gender inequality dimension of tribal women's life, the existing literature reported that women in most tribal societies in Kerala, especially in Wayanadu, had enjoyed equal status with men and were the cornerstone of the social structure of tribal societies in Kerala (Mathur, 1994). The women in tribal society have enjoyed certain economic and social equality. They were equal partners in family and conjugal rights, but they did not enjoy pre-marital freedom (Aerthayil, 2008). Though they have an important position in tribal society, they are debarred from exercising power over land. Even though these tribal women enjoyed some freedom with regard to marriage and family, they were marginalised within tribal communities in the socioeconomic and political aspects of daily life (*ibid*).

Evidence suggests that the workplace, residence, relatives' residence and schools set the social context for sexual intimacy. The physical, social, emotional and sexual proximity building processes eventually proceed to sexual intimacy and subsequent sexual relationships and pregnancies. This proximity building process generally takes place in socially sanctioned contexts such as the residence, relative's house, workplace and schools (Jose and others, 2011b). The comparison between rural and tribal pathways to unwed motherhood had revealed striking similarities and certain specific differences between tribal and rural pathway models. The pathways or process across rural and tribal structural contexts were consistent in many respects. In both contexts, predisposing factors at individual, familial and structural levels have resulted in social, physical, emotional and sexual proximity building, preceding to sexual intimacy and sexual relationships across rural and tribal systemic contexts.

It is evident that attaining unwed motherhood as an identity dehumanises and discredits individual victims. Thus, it is critical to examine the tribal unwed mothers' life from an increasingly detribalising structural context that impose a wide range of structural disabilities upon the victims. This results in restricted engagement and participation in socioeconomic, civic and cultural life. Hence, the purpose of the current study was to explore and document the lived experiences of being in unwed motherhood, their positions in the contexts of current relationships with their men, family and community and the broader structural social exclusion they experienced in daily life.

## Ethical Considerations

All participants in the study were educated about the purpose and significance of the same. Confidentiality was assured and informed consent in writing was obtained prior to initiating the study process. Interviews were conducted in a socially and culturally appropriate place, time and manner by female interviewers.

## METHODOLOGY

The qualitative study was designed and carried out with an aim to explore experiential aspects of stigma and discrimination from within and outside tribal families. The universe of the study was unwed tribal mothers of Wayanadu district, Kerala. These tribal women who conceived or gave birth to one or more children outside wedlock (Jose and others, 2010a; p-2), were selected; no specific age criterion was followed for selection of study participants. Tribal women who gave birth to one or more children outside wedlock but were currently married were excluded from the study.

Purposive sampling was used to ensure rich data collection during the qualitative phase as it helped to obtain maximum variation and document heterogeneous and multiple perspectives (Creswell, 2003). Data was collected by using in-depth interviews—a qualitative data collection method that facilitates an exchange between an interviewer and the respondent with an informal style, but guided by broad topics. It is a conversational partnership between an interviewer and a respondent (Rubin and Rubin 1995, p.10). Hence, 22 in-depth interviews were conducted with victims of caste-based violence to explore their lived experiences of stigmatisation and exclusion of unwed mothers within tribal households, the tribal community and the broader society.

All informants were contacted and interviewed by trained female interviewers. The 12 interviewers were from tribal communities and had a minimum of 12<sup>th</sup> grade education. Each semi-structured interview was conducted in Malayalam, the local language of Kerala, and lasted for about one hour. Soon after, the interviews were transcribed. First, the investigator translated all transcribed interviews into English. During this process, all personal identifiers that appeared in the transcribed texts were removed and codes were assigned to each data set to protect confidentiality of study participants. Translated texts were coded using ‘*a priori* codes’ derived from topic guides. Narrative thematic analysis was performed with an aim

to examine commonality, differences and relationships across themes that emerged across the data sets. An external auditor was consulted who did not have any direct involvement in the study process for reaching on an agreement on key inferences and evidence across data sets. This helped to bring about multiple perspectives on inference and interpretation of emerging themes.

## **STUDY FINDINGS**

### **Unwed Tribal Mothers: Characteristics**

The mean age of the unwed tribal mothers was 31.04 years with a range of 14 to 58 [40] years, and a SD of 9.25 years. The mean years of completed education were 4.9, with a SD of 2.6. The mean monthly income was Rs. 669.10, with a range of 250–2,000 [Rs.1,750], and a SD of Rs. 382.1. The mean age at first pregnancy was 19.62 years, with a range of 13-30 [17] years, and SD of 3.6 years. Of the study participants, 62.8% were engaged in work; the other 35.9% were unemployed. Majority of the study participants (48.7%) were agricultural coolies, 12.8% were housemaids; nearly half, that is, 46.2% reported living alone, and 34.6% were living with parents and siblings. Mothers were the significant caretakers/supporters of this population (24.4%). Father and siblings constituted the other significant group of caretakers/ supporters.

### **Fathers: Characteristics**

The data collected from the tribal women interviewed revealed that sexual interactions with family visitors/friends (38.5%) and employers (37.2%) resulted in women getting pregnant. Others constituted government officials, especially forest guards, and relatives. The initial sexual contact/relationship for a majority of the women was consensual (59%) but with a false promise of eventual marriage by the men concerned. The second largest group (30.8%) had sex by mutual consent. Some women (7.7%) reported forced and intimidated sexual exploitation, and 1.3% had consented for sexual intercourse due to parental pressure. Pregnancies from relationships with non-tribal men constituted more than half the number (51.3%). Men from their own tribe constituted the second largest group (37.2%) and another 10.3% were from other tribes. Women who conceived after relationships with non-tribal men or with men of other tribes face greater stigma and abuse as compared to women who became pregnant when in relationship with men from within their tribe.

## **Tribal Women in Unwed Motherhood**

### ***Emotional and Psychological Responses***

The narrative thematic analysis revealed that unwed mothers live through a series of positive and negative emotions and psychological responses in their initial periods of pregnancy. Some, had felt very happy because during the initial period, the men were living with them. Hence, they had a lot of dreams and expectations about their marital lives. Tribal women who were in relationships with non-tribal men reported that pregnancy brought about a new dimension in their relationship with the expectation of experiencing life outside the confines of tribal society. However, everything turned against them when the men refused to take responsibility for fatherhood, labeled them as women of immoral character and fabricated indecent stories about them in the community. This is reflected in the following statements:

A *Paniya* tribal girl said:

“...I was so happy, a lot of wishes, dreams, a life away from this society with these all I became blind. But everything turned against..”

An *Adiyan* tribal woman said:

“I was so happy when I came to know that I became pregnant and I felt a new meaning to life but soon everything turned against; but still I am happy for being a mother.”

A *Paniya* tribal girl said:

“I was happy when I came to know about my pregnancy and felt that our relationship had a meaning. I consulted a doctor, who confirmed it. Why should I become fearful when someone is there for me and one who will protect me?”

An *Adiyan* woman said:

“When I came to know that I was about to become a mother I was so happy because at that time the child’s father was not married. I was very happy as the child’s father was with me.”

Many mothers experienced extreme emotions of shock, disbelief and denial. They experienced uncertainty about the future, became fearful, felt giddy, and weak. Some of them experienced anger towards self accompanied with occasional suicidal thoughts and also attempted to commit suicide. Many felt unloved and isolated. Interactions with family members and individuals in the neighbourhood became difficult. One study participant went to the extent of changing her religion in order to get away from the discriminatory treatment she faced from her society.



A *Paniya* woman said:

“I felt totally destroyed! And [I] was fearful of talking about it [pregnancy] to others. How would I face others? Just that thought weakened me.”

A *Kattunaikya* woman said:

“I got angry with myself, attempted suicide, found it difficult to mingle with others; when thinking about this situation, I would feel giddy and weak. He did not accept the children, neither did he taken care of me nor he loved me as he used to.”

A *Paniya* girl said:

“My mind became too weak and I was fearful that society and my family would isolate me. I lost sleep and was afraid.”

## **Unwed Tribal Mothers and their Men**

The men responsible for unwed mothers in tribal communities gave varied responses; the most common being placing responsibility and blame on victims, denying fatherhood, persuading women to abort, and refusing to take responsibility towards the care of children and the household. However, it was also reported that some men were forced to take financial responsibility for children and household expenses.

### ***Denial of Responsibility***

Men responsible for pregnancy often denied or refused to take responsibility. Thus, women were often left voiceless and their complaints were largely unheard. There were occasions wherein such cases reached the police stations or a court of law. However, most of the time, such cases were settled outside the courts with nominal financial assistance and a promise to bear a share of the household and child rearing expenses in the near future. Very often, these promises were not adhered to. Even though men refused to accept responsibility for the women and their children, some of these women maintained sexual and emotional ties over a few years.

A *Paniya* woman said:

“...Child’s father told me that he was not responsible for this and he did not know anything. Later, he shifted out from my colony. I hate him because I became like this just because I listened to his words. Initially I had too much hatred but now I don’t feel anything...”

Another *Paniya* girl said:

“...He [child’s father] tells many [people] that he would take care of the children but neither gives nor takes care of the children or support. I do not wish any further relationships. I am not ready for any kind of relationship, hereafter. Initially I felt love, but now only hate... I never wish to see him. I hate the one who cheated both me and my sister at a time...”

An *Adiyan* woman said:

“...I have no contact with him and the case is in the court. I hate him with my heart because he cheated and destroyed my life. I feel like beating him whenever I see him. I pray that I should never see the child’s father...”

Yet, another *Paniya* woman said:

“The child’s father happily took me to the hospital and then later said, we don’t want this child now so let’s abort. I did not agree with that. Then he got angry and told me that he cannot marry me. He also said that he would be dishonoured in front of his family and friends.”

Another *Adiyan* said:

“The child’s father refused, saying this it is not his child and blamed me, saying it was someone else’s. He even accused me of having an immoral relationship with my father.”

*Justifications for Refusals:* Men offered various reasons for refusing to accept fatherhood. The most frequent justifications that emerged from the data were: “Don’t destroy my life as my marriage is already fixed”, and “Don’t say it to anyone because I will give you the expense [for child rearing and household]”. Some placed full responsibility on the women. The responses of some of these men are narrated below.

The statement made by the man of a *Paniya* girl:

“...Don’t say anything to me and I am not responsible for that. If my family gets to know they will abuse me. My marriage is fixed and it should not be destroyed by you...”

Another *Paniya* woman said:

“He told me that it was difficult to marry now, therefore, we don’t need to have a child. As I did not agree, he talked against me and spread false informatin that more than one man was responsible for the child.”

A *Kattunaikya* woman said:

“He told me that I should not tell anyone. He would give expenses for me and my children for the rest of my life. Don’t go and file a case. If anybody asks, you should say that you don’t have any problem like these—initially, he said this to me.”

### ***Persuasion to Abort the Child***

In some cases, men tried to persuade the women to abort. Problems surfaced when women refused to terminate their pregnancy. There are instances when women and their children have been insulted by these men. On seeing his child on the street, a father said, “Look here goes the burden [child] she tried to put on my shoulders!”

A *Paniya* girl said:

“...Child’s father told me that we don’t want that child and should destroy it somehow. When I heard this, I felt very sad and thought what should I do further? I don’t see or talk to him. As he was saying this is not his child, I filed the case. He does not like me working as a house maid. Problems are like these. Since the case is going on, he is not giving expenses either, and now I don’t even go to work...”

### **Emotional Bond and Sexual Relationships**

Most of these women were emotionally attached to these men. Thus, in such cases, men continued to maintain an exploitative sexual relationship even though they were married. In some cases, men continued to take care of both women and their children. On the other hand, some mothers terminated such exploitative relationships but, carried a huge amount of negative emotions.

An *Adiyan* woman said:

“Sometimes the child’s father comes home and gives the necessary help for the child. Nowadays, he comes and talks for some time. He loves me but his family will not allow (marriage). He means everything to me.”

Another *Adiyan* girl said:

“...he shifted his home from here. Though he does not come near my colony, I still long to see him. I still believe that he will come to take me one day. As he is the father of my children, so he will come one day. I live with that expectation.”

A *Paniya* woman said:

“He is not giving any expenses (financial security) for the first child, saying that this is not his child. But he is taking care of the second child. But he will not come and see me personally. My elder sister goes every month and gets money from him. If he comes to seem me, others will speak ill about him. He is living with a family, is it not? I love him as he is giving expenses to me and my children.”

A *Kattunaikya* woman said:

“He told me that we should bring up the children very well, and said that he would look after me and the children. He told us to live happily. Even now he is taking care of us as a father; he does everything for the children. He meets our expenses. He loves us very much and gives expenses for my children and me. Like others, he did not isolate me—that is my luck.”

Another *Paniya* woman said:

“He gradually got away from me. Once in a while he talks to the children but never accepts them as his own. He did not allow me to suffix his name to my children in school. I have no relationship with him now. If I see him or talk to him, I repeat the same mistake (sexual relationship) with him and that hatred has turned into love. I still love him as he is the father of my children and obey him willingly, and I still wish for a good family life.”

## **Break in Relationships**

In some contexts, non-tribal men get into a love relationship with tribal women and they start living together which is not appreciated either by the non-tribal or tribal communities. Thus, they live in isolation as social support systems are very weak at this point. In many such cases, men abandon these women and enter into other marital relationships. As these are live-in relationships, there is no question of legitimatising these relationships.

## **Unwed Mothers and Family**

### **Treatment within Families**

Most frequently reported forms of abuse faced by unwed mothers within their own families included physical torture and the threat of being thrown out of homes. In some cases, unwed mothers were actually asked to leave their homes. They were condemned and reprimanded for bringing disgrace to families, distancing families in tribal communities, and jeopardising the future of other siblings. Many of them were often forced to abort. They were excluded from the family's customary religious practices and celebrations. However, there were some unwed mothers who were empowered enough to protect their rights against discriminatory treatment and severe family responses. In some cases, despite the initial negative response by the family to pre-marital pregnancy, they are later taken care of by parents and siblings.

A *Paniya* woman said:

“I was very afraid of informing others about my pregnancy. Everybody blamed me. I bore many burdens... more burdensome was the gossip, teasing...”

Another *Paniya* girl also said:

“Family's behaviour was as if I had an infectious disease. Everyone betrayed me to make their lives safe; they lived separately and decided not to have any relationship with me. But my child is my life; my child makes me recognize the mistake I made. I will not let my situation affect my child.”

A *Kattunaikya* woman said:

“My family isolated me so I went and stayed with relatives. After a week, the father came and asked me to abort, but I did not agree.”

A *Kurichya* woman said:

“...my family viewed me as the hated one. I became unwanted by my friends. Society questioned me. I was scolded, beaten up and isolated from other siblings in my family...”

Another *Kattunaikya* girl said:

“I was pushed out of my home saying that I am a threat to my sibling’s future and everyone hated me and I was told that if I destroyed the child, then they would allow me to come back home.”

Yet another *Paniya* woman narrated:

“My family was extremely angry and beat me up so badly; but they did not throw me out of the home. I lose sleep and appetite with the thoughts of who would take care of me and my children?”

### **Family Support**

Adequate family support protects women from stigmatisation and discrimination. Unwed mothers who received family support were more resilient and were hopeful of a better future.

A *Paniya* girl said:

Family themselves took care of me and my child.

An *Adiyan* girl said:

“I was so sad. What should I do next? I felt like this was not happening to me... I was so sad and fearful and my mind was disturbed. However, my family supported me later, and I thought I should live somehow.”

### **Behavioural Responses of other Family Members**

A *Paniya* woman said:

“Earlier, my brother used to look after the home well; but after I became an unwed mother, he is not supporting the family needs. Everyone went their way. He started bad habits (smoking and drinking).”

A *Kattunaikya* woman said:

“I was blamed... blamed by saying I destroyed family relations and families got distant. I was isolated from everyone and blamed for not being eligible to get into a family [kudumpathil kayatan kollathaval]. Brother and sister kept a distance. I was very fearful, thinking that how would I face others? I felt what I did was wrong.”

A *Kurichya* woman said:

“My brother tried to beat me. I was bold enough as he is not the one giving me expenses [taking care of day to day life]. [He] scolded me so much [but] I argued much with him.

You don’t look after me... likewise’ I said.”

## **Unwed Mothers in the Structural Context**

### **Stigmatisation of Unwed Motherhood**

Tribal women who became pregnant outside of wedlock were stigmatised and isolated. They were denounced as women of immoral character

and shunned by society. Consequently, other family members were also disgraced and dishonored by the community. As a result they were distanced from friends and neighbours and were often confined to their homes. Mobility outside the home was often restricted with limited community participation and engagement.

A *Kurichya* girl said:

“Society blamed me saying that it is because of my own character; girls should be obedient enough. Everyone teased me. My friends stopped talking to me. Everybody hates me. Initially everyone used to scold me even though my father and mother were helping me. I was very afraid and thought about death because it was a disgrace to my mother and father.”

A *Paniya* girl said:

“My issue [pregnancy] became a topic of talk in my village. Family and society blamed me and everyone stopped loving me. The situation became such that I could not go out, villagers and family blamed me and nobody visited my home. My family blamed me but my siblings did not say anything. They, however, started watching me more closely and their affection towards me has reduced. I was too angry and fearful (when I first learnt about the pregnancy) and felt that I was alone.”

An *Adiyan* woman said:

“Others blamed me saying – ‘Oh! You have gone for this [sex] work! You might have earned a lot! Don’t give her work; if given, she will destroy the family [where she is employed]. If we walk with her, others will become bad.’ Family, neighbours and friends portrayed me as the worst girl. Everyone isolated me. The one who went with a man from another caste, should get out of the home—if we protect her, the future of other members of the family future will get destroyed,’ they said—hearing all this, I felt compelled to live separately—away from home.”

### ***Extended Stigma on Potential Helpers***

There were evidences where stigma was extended to other people such as friends, neighbours and even family members, if they associated or closely supported unwed mothers. They were teased by society, and peers were barred from interacting with them.

A *Paniya* woman said:

“Everyone talked ill about me and encouraged my family to torture me. I was isolated from everyone and they acted as if I had no way out. I was beaten up and pushed out of the home the moment they realised I had become a mother. They said they did not want to have any relationship with me and teased whoever helped me. I was isolated and I am not invited for celebrations.”

### ***Extended Stigma to Family Members***

Stigma attached to unwed mothers was extended to families. These families were blamed for being immoral and were socially isolated.

In some instances, family members as a whole were excluded from mainstream societal life and from common customary celebrations in tribal communities. As a result, these women were often isolated within their families and subjected to physical and verbal abuse. For instance, a study participant's brother, who used to take good care of the house had now started drinking and smoking. The participant attributed this to the dishonor brought by her to the family.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Situating Unwed Motherhood in the Structural Context**

It is imperative to conceptually define what is 'identity' and how does identity conceptually differ when we prefix 'social' to 'identity' before we delve deep into the stigma-inducing aspects of unwed motherhood as a social identity of tribal women. Therefore, 'identity' refers to self-image of a person's mental model of himself or herself, self-esteem and individuality. The gender is a critical construct to the degree of how an individual views him or herself both as a person and in relation to other people, ideas and nature. Cognitive psychology refers to 'identity' as the capacity for self-reflection and the awareness of self (Leary and Tangney, 2003, p.3), whereas 'social identity' refers to the most basic human experience of who we are and where we belong. It is about identifying self with others as well as aligning ourselves with a distinctive way of life and the people who share the values of that way of life (Lemtur, 2005).

In this regard it is important to examine unwed tribal motherhood as an identity that discredits unwed mothers in the context of stigmatisation and discrimination, and resultant social isolation and exclusion they face in their individual, familial and community life. Stigma is a powerful phenomenon with far-ranging effects on its targets (Crocker, 1999; and Link and Phelan, 2001). It is an attribute that extensively discredits the unwed tribal mother (individual), reducing her "from a whole and usual person to a tainted and discounted one" (Goffman, 1963; p. 3). Stigmatisation occurs when a person possesses or is believed to possess some attributes or characteristics that convey a social identity that is devalued in a particular social context (Crocker, Major, and Steele, 1998; p. 505). Treating 'unwed motherhood' as a devalued identity of unwed mothers, they experienced frequent blame, dishonour, distancing and isolation by families, peer groups, neighbourhoods and in the wider tribal society. In an extreme

example, one study participant converted to another religion to escape stigmatisation and discrimination.

The practice of this indirect oppression in the form of stigmatisation and discrimination often takes place outside the conscious awareness of persons who constitute basic social institutions such as family, neighbourhood and the wider community (Chakrapani and others, 2007). Thus ‘unwed motherhood’ as a devalued and discredited identity (Goffman, 1963) is subjected to this indirect practice of oppression in the context of family, neighbourhood and tribal community and wider society (Chakrapani and others, 2007). Going further, this stigmatisation and discrimination served as a tool to oppress unwed mothers by individuals and groups who assert their social control, prioritise and enforce their particular beliefs, world views and their power within societies (Galtung, 1969; Link and Phelan, 2001). These power-wielding groups have little awareness that privileging their own belief systems occurs at the direct expense or marginalisation of other social groups (Chakrapani, and others, 2007; p-347) such as unwed mothers.

Unwed mothers among tribal communities are more vulnerable to stigmatisation and discrimination. First, they are tribals. Second, because they are women in a male dominated social structure. Ethnic scheduled tribes who face marginalisation constitute around 84.3 million and are considered to be socially and economically disadvantaged.

Tribals in Kerala are mainly landless with little control over resources such as land, forest and water. They constitute a large proportion of agricultural, casual and plantation labourers. This has resulted in high incidence of poverty, low levels of education, poor health and reduced access to healthcare services (Chatterjee and Sheoran, 2007). In addition, the disturbing detribalisation trends in tribal societies such as gender equality, lower fertility and mortality patterns seem to be gradually eroding, as they get more integrated into non-tribal society and their traditionally sustainable livelihoods are encroached upon (Maharatna, 2005).

Further, the rural to urban migration of tribes have increasingly resulted in wearing down the sustainable tribal lifestyles (*ibid*). Viewing the inequitable social interaction between tribes and non-tribes in Wayanadu from a historical perspective, the migration of farming communities from erstwhile Travancore state from the 1950s to the early 1970s for agricultural land has resulted in long term impact on socioeconomic, political and cultural life of tribes in Wayanadu (Jose and others, 2011). A direct impact



of migration was the large scale occupation of tribal habitats and forest lands by the non-tribal migrant population. Tribes were displaced from their original forest habitats and were denied access to land and resources. Tribes who had not hitherto developed the modern sense of ownership of land and resources could not cling to their ancestral lands and properties. Besides, the forest laws have further aggravated tribal life in Wayanadu as these enactments have considerably restricted access to forest resources for livelihood (Aerthayil, 2008).

Entering as manual labourers in agricultural and allied activities of non-tribal farming communities has led to closer economic and social engagement between tribal and the non-tribal rural communities. But such social exchange, social engagement and social interaction between the tribes and non-tribes were not on an equitable basis, thanks to the socio-economic and political marginalisation faced by tribes at large in Kerala (Jose and others, 2011). It seemed that the social interaction and exchange controlled by dominant non-tribal social groups in Wayanadu, such as the workplace, residence and schools made tribal girls and women vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

Second, since feminism as an ideology covers all issues that degrade and deprive women from their due in society by male members (Mohapatra, 2009), it is critical to examine tribal unwed mothers' multiple deprivations and discrimination from a feminist perspective. Evidence suggests that the practice of feminism as a matter of habit for some tribal groups and its principles are ingrained in tribal culture (*ibid*). Further, the studies asserted that these tribal communities follow gender equity not out of fear, compassion, enlightenment, education or compulsion. Gender inequity is indigenous to tribal customs and practiced spontaneously (*ibid*). However, these are found to be varied across different tribal groups and geographical regions.

Governmental and non-governmental welfare interventions coupled with socioeconomic subordination of tribal communities to the non-tribal rural economy and society accelerated detribalisation (Jose and others, 2011; Jose and others, 2010a). As a result, the tribal woman's rights and agency to production, reproduction and sexuality are increasingly compromised.

Hence, programmatic and policy responses should be focused on individual, familial and structural factors leading to unwed motherhood, wherein her identity should be viewed as a product of wider structural

factors, including socio-political, economic and gender inequities. Social workers working in community, development and welfare sectors are in a better position to spearhead such projections of the discredited identity of 'unwed motherhood'. The medium in this regard might simply be contexts of community meetings, *grama sabha* or village assemblies, and Self Help Group (SHGs) meetings.

### **Psychology of Stigma**

The findings of the present study revealed a series of emotional and psychological trauma including experiencing feelings of shock, disbelief and denial on discovering their pregnancies. In addition, uncertainty about the future made them fearful, guilty, giddy and weak, further intensified with self-perception of stigma. (Jose and others, 2009). Personalisation of stigma is likely to precipitate complex aggression and anger towards self and manifested as depression, frequent suicidal ideations, and suicide attempts.

Consistent with a previous quantitative study on self-perception of stigma (public attitude towards unwed mothers), unwed mothers found it difficult to interact with family and other individuals from the neighbourhood. This is more likely due to excessive concern about public attitudes towards having children outside marriage. Further, disclosure was a matter of great concern (*ibid*).

Men from non-tribal societies responsible for unwed pregnancies often deny or refuse to take responsibility. One possible explanation could be the perceived and actual stigma attached to marrying tribal women and living with them in a non-tribal rural society. With weak social support systems, such couples live in isolation. Over a period of time, these women are abandoned as the men enter into other marital relationships.

### **Emotional Ties**

Many unwed mothers continued to live in exploitative sexual relationships. Alternative arrangements were made after discovering that these men were in marital relationships. This would often result in almost an equal number of children across married tribal mothers, unwed mothers and unwed mothers who married later (Jose and others, 2010a). This implied that the nature of pre-marital sexual relationships were likely to be ongoing and consistent, and occasionally with multiple sex partners rather than the commonly perceived single or occasional episodes (*ibid*). In some cases, even though the men had abandoned the women and their children, the

women continued to live in the hope that the men would eventually return to them.

### **Conflict Resolution Mechanism**

In a few instances when men responsible for pregnancies deny or refuse to accept responsibility, women have filed complaints with the police and some cases have been adjudicated in the courts. However, such matters are settled outside the courts with nominal financial assistance and an assurance from the father that he would contribute towards child care and household expenses. These promises have largely remained unfulfilled. Therefore, investigations need to focus on the process and outcome of both institutional and non-institutional conflict resolution models in practice that govern the lives of tribal women.

### **Families as Perpetrators and Victims of Stigma**

Families of unwed mothers were found to be both perpetrators and victims of stigmatisation and discrimination. Most unwed mothers were subjected to physical, emotional and mental abuse for bringing disgrace and dishonour to the family. Unwed mothers were also forced to abort or face the prospect of being disowned. Data also revealed that families of unwed mothers were socially isolated and were not allowed to participate in community functions or express their opinions in such forums.

### **Programmatic and Policy Recommendations**

The current study has reiterated the need to scale up social investments by the state and central governments and other donor agencies committed to the cause of tribal welfare and development. These interventions may be directed at three critical delivery points—at the individual, familial and structural levels. (Jose and others, 2010a).

*Tailored Clinical Social Work Interventions:* Psychosocial care and support through individual specific clinical social work interventions such as crisis intervention, individual and family counselling, and home visits.

*Assertive Skill Training for Unwed Mothers:* This may be a critical programmatic response, as unwed mothers had reported having an almost equal number of children as tribal women who are in marital relationships (Jose and others, 2010a). This is also important in the case of ongoing exploitative sexual relationships where emotional support is vital.

*Enable and Empower Tribal Women to Access Formal Institutions of Justice:* Extending legal advocacy and rights education programmes may

help women to break free from exploitative sexual relations (Jose and others, 2010b). Community based organisations and non governmental organisations can effectively take up representational roles for these women and facilitate access to justice and justice systems. Bringing various stakeholders on a common platform such as the National and State Human Rights Commissions, Women's Commissions, State and District Legal Service Authorities, and other non-governmental and voluntary activists and legal service providers may help sensitise justice providers to take up this cause.

*Initiating and Strengthening Social Support Groups for Unwed Tribal Mothers:* Though unwed mothers showed better empowerment in individual and familial spheres, they experienced increased social problems, inadequate social support and poorer quality of social life. Hence, interventions need to be tailored for increasing psychosocial support through social support groups (SSGs) which are critical for enhancing better quality of social life.

Similarly, initiating SSGs and strengthening such groups to scale-up secondary social support may enable unwed mothers to fight against structural atrocities and oppression. (Jose and others, 2010). SSGs are likely to act as an effective empowerment tool and can also function as self-help groups (SHGs). Finally, public campaigns and utilisation of mass media may provide better outreach to tribal communities (Jose and others, 2010).

*Initiate and Promote Micro Credit Programmes for Tribal Mothers:* The data gathered revealed that unwed mothers worked more regularly, earned more income than the other two groups of participants, and showed a better empowerment score on the E-Index. In this scenario, initiating and promoting micro-credit programmes/ or income generation programmes (IGPs) for tribal women is critical for women empowerment and economic independence.

*Welfare Programmes:* Literacy programmes for tribal women need to be linked to existing state sponsored programmes. Illiteracy and structural backwardness are severe among the *Paniya* and *Adiyan* tribal communities making them more vulnerable to pre-marital sexual relationships. NGOs and local administrative bodies can play a constructive role to identify and link vulnerable tribal women to such welfare programmes.

*Customised Educational and Literacy Services through Local Dialects:* Spreading customised educational and literacy services through educated tribal volunteers was expected to help facilitate easy knowledge transfer in their own local dialects as about 14 tribal groups are present in Wayanadu

and each group has its own local dialect. Most key informants attributed the higher drop-out rates among tribal children as a result of non-integration of tribal dialects in teaching curriculum. This needs to be understood in the context where the regional language (Malayalam) is not the language of the tribes in Wayanadu.

*Social Integration:* Creating gainful employment opportunities and working towards improving social acceptance and integrating unwed mothers to mainstream social life through facilitating their community and social participation and engagement can be a critical strategy.

## CONCLUSION

The results of the present study conform with the social exclusion model proposed by Vinod and others (2011) and detailed by Jose and others (2011b). This model views the discredited social identity as a consequence of unwed motherhood. The self-perceived stigma and discrimination experienced within the structural contexts of the family, community and neighbourhood contributes to a range of psychosocial trauma and alienation. There is extensive scope to address these issues through social work intervention in tribal communities.

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