

WOMEN ALONE: THE PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES OF WIDOWS IN INDIA

PRITHA DASGUPTA

Guest Faculty, Indian Institute of Psychology and Research, St. Joseph's Law College, Bangalore, Karnataka

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to draw the picture of the status of female headed households and the pressures that widows in the world face. It is also intended to throw light on the challenges and problems of widows in the current scenario. There is a conspicuous absence of feminist, scholarly writing on widows in India. This paper highlights the need today, to make a paradigmatic shift in our perception, to study the problems encountered by these women.

Research on the elderly—the majority of whom are widowed women—has been undertaken by NGOs. Such work, however, ignores younger widows and widows who do not head households. Even the number of widows, as a percentage of the female population is often unknown. In addition, there is a lamentable dearth of knowledge and reliable data, on widowhood in the context of armed conflict, farmer's suicide and the HIV/AIDS pandemic. It has become apparent that, adequate quantitative and qualitative information is needed to inform and guide policy makers and planners. Data are available more, for the industrialized or more developed countries, than in the developing or least developed states. A lack of reliable hard data is one of the biggest obstacles, to influencing policies and programmes that address the situation of widows.

Methodologies utilized for gathering census data in many developing countries, are often not designed to identify the inequalities inherent in widowhood, or to reveal the unpaid economic contribution, widows of all ages make to society. Widows may in fact be excluded from national censuses because; they are homeless or constantly moving among a number of different households, headed by relatives. Moreover, the poverty experienced by individual widows residing within households, is often hidden, since poverty surveys tend to obscure the inequitable distribution of cash, land and other critical resources, within a family and between households.

From time immemorial, widows have been victims of a patriarchal system, without challenging it. Paule Friere (1993) describes this as a culture of silence among the dispossessed, which perpetuates their oppression. Such oppression denies critical awareness, to respond to their situation and they lack even the basic vocabulary to expose it. Widowhood essentially represents the historical power imbalance, between men and women. Yet, concern about widows worldwide and glaringly in India has almost remained invisible, in the women's movement.

KEYWORDS: Trauma of Widows, Patriarchy, Socioeconomic and Socio-Cultural Milieu

INTRODUCTION

India has recorded the largest number of widows in the World. These widows till today, remain oppressed by norms, traditions and cultural expectation of the past. Within the feminist discourse, the currently prevalent myths, stereotypes, assumptions and perceptions need to be challenged and examined, in the context of culture and history. Social policies and actions must be oriented, to ameliorate the condition of widows. This must occur at two levels – At the individual level, women can be seen as the victims of the tragic episode, leading to social discrimination and economic

deprivation. At the societal level, widows can be seen as a part of an uncaring society. The concerns remain very much alive as in the past, though the focus today includes not only the hardship of child widows, but also those who despite being educated face discrimination in the patriarchal society. In Post-Independence, we get another picture of widows, who are single and work for a living, bring up children, cope with loneliness and pressures of urban life (Sogani, 2002).

Widows across the globe share two common experiences: a loss of social status and reduced financial stability. In both developed and developing countries, widows suffer a dramatic and subtle transformation in their social position. The relative poverty of widows, especially those working in the unorganized sector and young widowed mothers, with children, marginalize them from mainstream society and increases their vulnerability to depression, ill health and violence.

Today, millions of the world's widows, of all ages, endure extreme poverty, ostracism, violence, homelessness, ill health and discrimination in law and custom. A lack of inheritance and land rights, widow abuse and the practice of degrading, and life-threatening mourning and burial rites are prime examples of human rights violations that are justified by reliance on culture and tradition. Many states in India have introduced pension for widows. However, the monetary value of widows' pensions is a continuing source of grievance, since the value often does not keep up with fluctuations in the ever-changing cost-of-living indices, or with expectations.

Dominant World View

Widows' deprivation and stigmatization have been exacerbated by ritual and religious symbolism. The world view of the widow was shaped by the religious belief that the husband is God and devotion to him is of crucial significance not only in life but also in death. The so called transgressive behaviour of the widow thereby has a negative impact on the spirit of the husband. This is evident from the following paragraph "Widow Discrimination in India has a long history. According to Ahmad (2009), in ancient Hindu law, the concept of *stridharma* entails a woman's devotion to her husband. This signifies women's duties, roles, and moral responsibilities. According to this ancient law a husband is a sort of god for women, and in fact *Sawaami*, the Sanskrit word for husband, means literally "Lord and Master." Families often believe that any "immoral" act by the wife damages her husband's spirit". According to sacred texts by Manu "A virtuous wife is one who, after the death of her husband constantly remains chaste and reaches heaven, though she has no son." This was how *sati*, the Hindu family practice of a widow immolating herself on her husband's funeral pyre, became common in India. The ritual of *sati* was first reported by Greek travellers to northern India in the 4th century B.C. (Basham, 1954: 187).

Asish Nandy (1992) finds *sati* to be prominent in Bengal, due to the presence of Dayabhaga system of inheritance in Bengal. Under the Dayabhaga system, widows could inherit the husband's property if the latter died without having a son, even if the family was undivided. The inheritance right given to women posed a serious threat to the patriarchal order. The custom of *sati* ensured that such rights failed to materialize in practice. The orthodox society was up in arms against those who protested against *Sati*. However, the orthodox society tried to project Bengali women as self-sacrificing and chaste.

Colonial Legacy

Many laws have been passed to prevent people from discriminating against widows. In 1829, during the British colonial period, the British Government banned the ritual of *sati*. More recently, the Indian Government enacted the Commission of *Sati* (prevention) Act of 1987. After that, the government continued its efforts to toughen the laws against *sati* until at least 2008 (Ahmed 2009).

According to Ahmed (2009), there are still sporadic instances of *sati* in India. For example, a young widow, aged only 18, was forced to commit suicide after the death of her husband in Rajasthan in 1987. When the case came to trial later, in 1996, the Indian Court upheld her “suicide” as a social tradition and acquitted all 38 defendants who assisted her act. In 2002 a 65-year-old widow committed *sati* in Madhya Pradesh. And in Uttar Pradesh in 2006, a 35-year-old widow died by jumping into the blazing funeral pyre of her husband. Then, in Chhattisgarh in 2008, a 71-year-old widow committed *sati*.

The onset of the twentieth century saw an intensification of pressures for changing the legal status of women. The AIWC attempted to uplift women’s education as well as remove the legal liabilities of Indian women. The Indian Penal Code of 1860 set the minimum age of marriage for girls at ten and the age of Consent Bill of 1891 raised it to twelve.

In 1929, the Child Marriage Restraint Act came into force, in which the minimum age of a bride was fixed at fourteen. This was done in the light of the Census of India, 1921 which showed that a sizeable portion of widows were very young

Age structure of Widows, 1921

Table 1

Age (in years)	Number of Widows in 1921
Below 1 Year	612
Under 5 Years	2024
Under 10 Years	97857
Under 15 Years	332024

Source: The Hindu Code Bill – A Historical Background, Debating Patriarchy, 2012

The Hindu Remarriage Act was enacted in 1856. The Hindu Widow Remarriage Act did not immediately transform the condition of Hindu Widows but created awareness in society about the plight of widows.

Geraldine Forbes (1998) observes in her book “Women in Modern India” that the Widow Remarriage Act did not change the status of widows. Frequently blamed for the husband’s death, the high caste widow was required to relinquish her jewellery and subsist on simple food. The dissenting social attitude prevented the act from being successful. This was evident from the stabilization on widow remarriage, not more than a dozen took place every year.

Morality Model

An understanding of the trauma of widowhood is not possible without an understanding of the past. Any attempt to understand the role and status of women in history must take primary cognizance of these women. The trauma of widowhood is a symbol of the social insult inflicted upon them in a variety of ways throughout life and continues till today. Historically, the prevalent morality model of widowhood suggested that widowhood is caused by

moral lapses and would bring shame to the individual and to the family. Widowhood was seen as a stigma, the widow of blemished person, to be punished and isolated at worst and avoided and pitied at best.

Reddy (2004) highlights some of the myths that revolved around widows.

- A Hindu woman's widowhood is considered as a punishment for the crime committed by her in a previous life. Hence she is a sinner.
- Widowhood among upper caste is a state of social death.
- Once a person ceases to be a wife ceases to be a person.
- Widows are inauspicious.

Whether young or old, widowed women leave behind their colourful saris, part with their jewellery, and even shave their heads, if they are on the more conservative tradition. All of this is designed so as not to encourage male gaze.

Widows seem to follow rules based on tradition because they have internalized them. They keep doing what other widows did without asking, resigned to a kind of fate—such as placing restrictions on their own diets. Certain communities believe that onion, garlic, pickles, potatoes, and non-vegetarian food are taboos for widows. It is due to these practices that mortality rates are 85 percent higher among widows than among married women, according to research by the Guild of Service. In much of Indian society—across caste and religion—a widow is often perceived by family members to be a burden.

Although social rules differ greatly, all cultures have rules which govern women's lives. Across a wide range of cultures, widows are subject to patriarchal customary and religious laws and confront discrimination in inheritance rights. Many of these widows suffer abuse and exploitation at the hands of family members, often in the context of property disputes. Few cases proceed successfully through the justice system; perpetrators go unpunished, while others remain undeterred and undetected. Even in countries where legal protection is more inclusive, widows suffer from the loss of social status and marginalization.

It is often assumed that widows are elderly. However, many widows in developing countries, in areas of conflict or in communities ravaged by HIV/AIDS are young or middle-aged. Widows, of all ages, are often evicted from their homes, stigmatized and physically abused – some even killed. Widowed mothers, as the sole supporters of their offspring, are forced to withdraw these children from school and to rely on their labour. The daughters of widows may suffer multiple deprivations, increasing their vulnerability to abuse.

A common consequence of widowhood in traditional societies is the withdrawal of children from School due to economic impoverishment. Girls are likely to be the first affected; they are needed to care for younger siblings while the widowed mother works; or they must find work themselves. Girls who leave school too soon are more likely to become child brides and child mothers, potentially causing damage to their reproductive health and limiting their chances for economic autonomy.

The plight of widows remains even in Modern India. Driven by financial insecurity and harassment even today they take refuge in the religious sites like Mathura, Vrindavan, Varanasi. Saraswati (1985) has made a threefold study of

Kashivasi widows, where he concludes that all the major and cultural, linguistic religions of India and also the four varnas are represented. Ethnicity is an important factor in the life of Kashivasi widows. The widows reside in their linguistic cluster and interact closely with the members of the group. The majority of them do not visit their homes, nor do their kinsmen visit them. The crisis of widowhood is that she may be often suspected of illicit romance. A single woman has been the object of suspicion in society. She is often identified as a witch.

Chen (2000) reports that, words for widows are often derogatory, such as “Witches” or “Dakshas”. Woman has been labelled as ‘witches’ and it is often the widows who are most vulnerable, single and articulate become victims of such a system. Mojho, a widow with four children were attacked by members of her own village, who came in the middle of the night and stoned her house. They accused her of eating up her sister-in-law’s children.

Mental illness in widows covers a wide and diverse range of conditions, from common problems like depression, stress and anxiety to more serious illnesses such as personality disorders. Mental well-being includes emotional stability, the joy to live and good interpersonal relationships. Loss of the husband to death is common causes of mental problems of women which include. (Victor et al. 2000)

- Distress and sense of helplessness
- Adjustment difficulty after widowhood due to lack of financial support from husband.
- Social isolation, and feelings of out of touch due to exclusion from social functions
- Loss of confidence and self worth, misconception that family members and society no longer respect them
- Sense of loneliness

The best of art is that which speaks in various forms and voices of the lives of these dispossessed women, of the way they live, cope and overcome and dream of a better, fairer, kinder world. Among the most moving autobiographies I have encountered recently is that of Lakshmi Kannan’s ‘At the Crossroads’ (2008). It is a significant contribution to our collective social conscience. She talks of caring for her husband with terminal illness where all the vital organs had failed. In short, he was trapped within a body that did not work anymore. After his death, rituals were there for funeral ceremonies keeping a strident count of the days all of which was properly conducted. Even in modern days, she was discretely shunned on festivals and special occasions as her presence was considered inauspicious.

Widowhood and poverty are closely interrelated. Widows of all ages are often evicted from their homes and stigmatized. Widowed mothers as the sole supporters of the family suffer multiple deprivation. Women’s movement, however has been exclusive preserve of the urban middle class. There is a need today to make a paradigmatic shift in our perceptions of the problems faced by Indian woman especially the marginalized widows. We must try to look at the world through the eyes of rural and urban poor women as well.

CONCLUSIONS

Loneliness is the major problem widows’ face. Loneliness not only encompasses a sudden lack of companionship, but often involves questioning whether life is worth living without the partner. It seems necessary for the widow to

partially fill the void or emptiness left by the husband in order to have the desire to continue living and create a new life for her.

To fill this emptiness or void, it was essential to have a developed social network system. It would seem likely family members would come to the aid of the widow during the time when she requires much emotional support, but in reality, family support may virtually disappear. Property-grabbing and chasing off are part of the common experience of widows, whether Christian, Hindu or Muslim – regardless of their ethnic group, caste or culture. In all cultural settings, widowhood is associated with trauma and presents a myriad of problems of varied nature; economic, social and psychological dimension. Apparently predicaments disorganization and trauma of widowhood are unlike in men as in women. The challenges that follow the death of a spouse seem to be greater in women than in men, whenever either loses a spouse.

To further help the widow adjust to the problems of widowhood, we must actively seek involvement from governmental agencies, social organizations and religious institutions. Existing widow programs must be expanded, but we must also continue to develop more programs such as a Widowhood Resource Center.

The suggestions that have been provided here are necessary, yet in order for them to be implemented, we must begin by increasing public awareness about the problems of widowhood and what would be helpful in dealing with the problems. Two valuable ways of educating the public are by: sensitizing on the plight of the widowhood and encouraging further research into widowhood.

The purpose of our paper is to increase public awareness about the problems of widowhood. In conclusion, we feel that some of the areas which need to be further researched include: 1. The development of an effective social network system, 2. Differences between younger women and older women who are widowed, 3. Cultural differences in widowhood adjustment, 4. The effect of the length of time married and widowhood adjustment, 5. The effect of existing widowhood programs on widowhood adjustment, 6. The adjustment differences between widows and widowers.

REFERENCES

1. Ahmad, N. (2009). Sati Tradition- Widow Burning in India: A Socio-legal Explanation.
2. Basham, A. L. (1954). *The Wonder That Was India*. London: Sidgwick and Jackson.
3. Chen, Martha Alter, *Perpetual Mournings widowhood in Rural India*. Oxford University Press: 2000.
4. Freire, P (1993) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Penguin, London.
5. Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, Cambridge University Press : 1998.
6. Nandy A. (1992), 'Sati: A Nineteenth Century Tale of Women, Violence and Protest', in Ashish Nandy, *At the Edge of Psychology*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.
7. SaraswatiBaidyanath, *TheKashivasi Widows from Man in India*, Vol.65, No.2, June, 1985.
8. Sinha Chitra (2012), *Debating Patriarchy – The Hindu Code Bill Controversy in India*, Oxford University Press.
9. Sogani, Rajul, *The Hindu Widows in Indian Literature*, Oxford University Press: 2002. *Web Journal of Current Legal Issues*, 2009 (2).