



# An Overview of Socio-economic Living Conditions of Widows

Gisala George<sup>a</sup>, Subhitha Menon<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Physical Education, Mercy College, Palakkad 678006

<sup>b</sup>Department of Social Work, Mercy College, Palakkad 678006

## Abstract

Widows in every society face multiple and conflicting social challenges. Their status is defined by a diverse group of interrelated and intersectional factors - social, religious, cultural as well as economic, all of which not only isolate them from their families and community, but also leave them responsible for the care and support of their children. This is particularly true for India, where the life of an individual is governed by certain socio-cultural norms which determine a person's social standing as well as purpose and function in life. Developed over centuries, these socio-cultural norms are mainly responsible for the subordination of women within the family.

## Keywords

Socio-economic; Family; Widowhood; Subordination; Social Impact

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The family is the first and basic human community which is a sphere of life as well as a sphere of love. The life of every society, nation and state depends on the family, on whether the family is a true sphere of life and love in their midst. The family which consists of father, mother and children or a family that consists of husband, wife and children is always a treasure in life. If any one of them dies or is lost, the gap cannot be filled by anyone else. The lack of bread winner will lead the mother to many miseries and problems. If it is by death, it will be a great loss. This will affect the mother/wife physically, mentally, emotionally, psychologically and socially. Generally, a widow is a woman whose husband is dead and who has not remarried (2006).

Widowhood is the change in the status of a women brought about by the death of the spouse in martial relationship and which necessitates the establishment of new relationships within the family, within the kin-group and within the community. Widowhood is a very stressful situation; it brings about several socio-economic, cultural, emotional and psychological deprivations. Certain social stigma is attached to widows. She cannot participate in social and religious activities. She has to isolate herself from the mainstream. A

widow is not supposed to wear thali, flowers, kumkum, and colour dress. She should eat very simple food and she has to avoid all pleasures and comforts of the society.

## 2. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

### 2.1 Widows in India

In the culture of India from ancient times it is seen that family feels deeply the loss of a bread winner. Though the women rights commission and other socially committed organizations have focused on the under-privileged sections of the society like women, children, refugees and other such marginalized sections, the issues and problems attached to widowhood still remain neglected. A woman is considered as a housewife or as a widow depending upon her husband that is whether the husband is alive or not. So it can be said that women achieve the status of widowhood through no fault of them. Sociologically widowhood is neither an ascribed status nor an achieved one; rather it is a constructed status of gender disability (1980).

Apart from these traditional practices associated with widowhood, loss of husband has a social, cultural, economic, physical as well as psychological impact on a woman. A widow is often vulnerable to physical, sexual and mental abuse (2002). She is socially marginalized and culturally ostracized in societies where life revolves around the male. The loss of her husband results in her withdrawal from reproduction and sexuality and debarment from the functioning social unit of the family. She is expected to lead a life of austerity, social segregation and devotion (1999). She is excluded from all auspicious ceremonies for even her shadow is considered to be a bad omen. For the rest of her life she is supposed to remain in mourning. The ultimate humiliation comes when she is thrown out of the family and packed off to Vrindavan or Varanasi to fend for herself. The two holy places are packed with such widows, who survive by begging for scraps of food and singing bhajans for “pennies” in the local temples (2016). This social exclusion is reinforced by the economic hardship confronted by the widows. One of the reasons for social exclusion of widows is that they are considered a financial drain on their families. In the first place, lack of skills place women in a position of acute dependence on their husbands. Death of the husband, therefore, implies loss of the breadwinner, which affects them economically, often throwing them into extreme penury and putting them into the category of poorest of the poor. The problem is aggravated due to lack of economic and social support from the family and the community (2004). Economic deprivation is further accentuated by lack of education, age and above all cultural norms restricting the mobility and even employment opportunities of widows. Majority of the widows live in households headed by them as sole breadwinners for their children, which puts a lot of burden on them to meet the expenses of children's education, their marriage and day to day expenses (2008). Studies also reveal that female headed households are generally poorer than male headed households.

All these factors impinge upon her physical as well as mental health. Bereavement has a profound impact on the widow which results in a life of isolation. Psychologically, she may suffer from depression and fear. Harmful mourning and burial rites also damage their health and scar forever emotionally. These include being forced to drink water in which the dead has been washed, confined in a dark room, prohibited from washing even if she is menstruating, causing serious health hazards (2004). Sense of insecurity, both social

and financial, causes severe mental stress which results in a number of related problems. Many times, widows have to migrate to other places for livelihood and in this process they may be forced to enter sex trade and become vulnerable to HIV/AIDS. The widow of HIV/AIDS positive husband is not only blamed for the death of her husband but also thrown out by in-laws and matrimonial homes which may force them into prostitution, vagrancy, a life on the streets or, in extreme cases, suicide caused by mental harassment (1999). The undermined mental and physical health contributes to early mortality of widows. Mortality rates among widows are 82 percent higher than among married women in the same age group, a fact which confirms the high rates of deprivation experienced by widows. Thus, widows are deprived of their basic human rights to shelter, food, and clothing and discriminated against in relation to health, work, dignity and participation in community life.

The status and problems of the widow vary in accordance with the category of the widow. Elderly widows are much more dependent in all aspects in comparison to young widows. Young widows suffer more from psychological difficulties whereas old widows suffer from physical difficulties also. Widows from the younger age group are also more frequent victims of sexual harassment and abuse.

Widowhood practices across different religions are not identical. Widowhood in Islam is a non-issue. This is because marriage in Islam is not a sacred vow or a sacrament. It is a civil contract. The prophet himself married a twice widowed lady. Positive Quranic injunctions provide for inheritance of property by widows and their children. Thus widows enjoy a comparatively better social status in Islam. Similarly Christianity also does not place taboos on widows. Christian Church, all over and even in India gives freedom to widows for remarriage. They are free to attend religious and social functions. However, the influence of Hinduism has led to the Christians adopting many of the pernicious practices of Hindus pertaining to widows.

During the Vedic period the status of women was high. There was no early marriage and hence the number of widows was very small. Sati was not in practice. Widows were allowed to remarry if they wished so. Such a married widow was called 'punerbhu'. For widows there was no restriction regarding wearing clothes, jewellery, combing hair etc. She had the privilege of adopting of a child. Widows enjoyed considerable status and authority. She was not discriminated. Therefore the Vedic period was golden for single women.

After the Vedic period the conditions deteriorated for women and for widows in particular. Deterioration started with agriculture becoming more organized and systematic giving male authority an upper hand over women who got dependent on them for living and security. With the invasion of Aryans the entire social system changed. Aryans settled with their patriarchal approach. The local matriarchal system changed to patriarchal system. This was one of the probable reasons for deterioration of status of women. The Hindu law giver Manu's ruling made women entirely dependent on man and subjected her to the authority of a father, husband and son in the respective periods of her life as daughter, wife and mother. This tightened the grip of man over women from birth till her death and thus begins the history of abuse related to women.

The position of women deteriorated further during medieval period with the invasion of Mughals. Hindu society deliberately encouraged the practices of female infanticide, child marriage, sati and purdah system and banned female education, all on account of insecurity created by repeated foreign onslaughts.

Among the upper caste women sati became a mark of prestige. In the name of satitva or chastity, the women sacrificed. The natural affection towards the husband become a force full and obligatory action. The life of widows was a long tale of sacrifices, sufferings, troubles and helplessness. Economically the position of widow was deplorable. She had no right in property of her father, husbands and in laws. Severe insults were heaped on them after the death of their husbands, as they were held responsible for their husband's death. She had to live a very simple life.

Raja Ram Mohan Roy was a great scholar, educationist, social worker and linguistic who watched his sister-in-law's self-immolation on the funeral pyre of his brother. This incident changed his mind and he resolved to fight against this inhuman practice of sati. He got sati completely abolished with the help of Lord Bentinck in 1829. Keshav Chandra Sen worked for the upliftment of women. He took interest in widow remarriage and the first marriage was performed under his inspiration in 1864. Ishwar Chandra Sen a great social reformer mobilised public opinion in favour of widow remarriage by this in 1856 Widow Remarriage Act was passed. The father of our nation Gandhiji was a real emancipator of women .He made all effortS to abolish all the evil which hampered the growth of women .He strongly condemned child marriage and widowhood. He advocated widow remarriage

## 2.2 Widows in Kerala

There is a slightly higher proportion of widows in Kerala (10%) compared to the Indian average. This may be attributed to Kerala's demographic profile (i.e. higher female life expectancy), a greater age differential at marriage, and low remarriage rates among widows (1974). The studies on the welfare of widows have focussed on widowhood in northern India, where they face greater levels of discrimination compared to their southern counterparts in general and Kerala in particular. Women in Kerala are known for their elevated status. The gender bias in sex ratios found in India is absent in Kerala (the female to male ratio is 1,058 and 933 per 1,000 for Kerala and India respectively) (1979). While life expectancy for Indian women and men is almost identical (61 years for women and 60 years for men), Kerala reports female advantage (76 years for women and 70 years for men) and the highest female life expectancy in the country. The gender gap in literacy rates is relatively narrow (88% for women and 94% for men in 2011), fertility rates are low (below replacement levels) (1993). It has been argued, however, that these indicators only tell part of the story; patriarchal norms continue to reign over the lives of women, manifesting in various forms, including domestic violence (1987). It is also reported that Kerala has the worst record among the Indian states for economic dependency among the elderly; 76% of its elderly women reporting no financial asset in their name.

## 3 Stages of widowhood

The vulnerability of widows may be characterized into three phases. The initial phase occurs prior to her husband's death. During this time, she may be confronted with caring for her husband (if he is ill) or dealing with his alcohol abuse. In both cases, women may need to assume financial responsibilities due to medical bills (in the first case) and the shedding of any financial responsibility from the husband (in the second case). Women may face other challenges during this stage. Women with husbands who abuse alcohol may

also be victims of domestic violence. Although we did not explicitly explore this issue, as it is an extremely sensitive topic requiring special ethical and methodological considerations, physical violence did arise as a consequence of alcohol abuse in the cases of Beena and Usha. Moreover, there is a growing literature demonstrating alcohol to be a determinant of domestic violence in India. Additionally, while the prevalence of HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases is relatively low in Kerala, in other parts of India, women may face the additional burdens of getting infected themselves. It is less clear how the loss of a husband due to an accident or non-stigmatising illness may influence the characterisation of this first phase, but will likely depend on the immediacy of these causes of death (e.g. a lengthy period of care giving in the case of a debilitating accident versus an accident that caused immediate death).

The second phase occurs when a woman's husband dies. At this time, women must not only cope with the loss of their husband but also are faced with the challenges of ensuring the livelihood of their children, while coping with financial debts incurred from medical bills if the husband was ill for a long period of time or the social stigmatization if the husband committed suicide, or died from alcohol-related causes or socially stigmatizing diseases, such as HIV/AIDS. During this period, there appears to be little support beyond assistance from community, which the women in our sample felt was an important albeit temporary source of support, thereby increasing the vulnerability of widows and their children to impoverishment and poor health. Again, it is unclear from our study how the loss of husband from an accident or non-chronic illness may influence this phase; however, the sudden and unexpected loss of husband will likely exacerbate the intensity of the 'shock'—both emotionally and financially—experienced by the woman and her family. During the third phase, women may begin to learn to assume greater decision-making roles in their households. Enhancing women's decision-making agency has been advocated as one approach to improving women's status. However, some researchers have cautioned that we should not assume that this should translate into women making individualised decisions; 'joint decision making' when women make decisions in partnership with their husbands should also be considered a sign of women's control. While we did not explicitly study decision-making as part of this study, not having information on women's decision-making agency before and after becoming a widow, our results suggest that women found the initial period of having to assume all major household decisions to be stressful due to the competing demands that they faced. But over time, the women acquired more confidence in their decision making skills, especially when they could integrate their children into the decision-making process, which suggests that individualised decision-making is not necessarily the ideal situation for all women.

During the third phase, women were also taking on the role of the main breadwinner. In the absence of family support, widows enter the labour force or expand their activities, usually working long hours and often in less than ideal conditions. Widows, particularly younger widows, face social stigmatisation and restrictions in their social and occupational mobility, limiting their employment opportunities as well as their participation in social and community activities.

#### **4. The major problems of widows**

Women constitute about half of the population of country, however, they face disparities, inequalities, exploitation and abuse which are adversely affect their health, nutrition, educational attainment, skills,

occupational status, etc. There are a number of gender specific barriers which prevent women from gaining access to their rightful share in the flow of public goods and services. These barriers have roots in prevailing socio-cultural value system, institutional set-up and social structure. Unless these barriers are removed and the felt needs of women are incorporated in the planning and development process, the fruits of economic growth are likely to bypass a large segment of human resources of the country. India being a democratic country cannot afford development without considering women as they are the prime mover of economy besides their significant contribution in the economy. Eliminating gender discrimination and empowering women are among the paramount challenges facing the world today. Despite the international community's commitment to gender equality, the lives of millions of women and girls throughout the world are affected by discrimination, disempowerment and poverty. Gender equality is central to realizing the Millennium Development Goals. Eliminating gender discrimination and empowering women will require enhancing women's influence in the key decisions that shape their lives.

#### **4.1 Economic/Financial issues**

The widows have to face many kinds of deprivation: economic, social cultural and emotional. Of all the deprivations, the economic deprivation is the most harmful. Earlier researches show that household headed by widows suffer dramatic decline in per capita income and that the mortality risk of widowhood was higher for women than men. Among basic causes of their vulnerability are restrictions on the residence, inheritance, remarriage and employment opportunities of widows. With women living longer, they are more likely to outlive their husbands. A bulk of these women does not have training and assistance to manage their financial affairs independently like pension and other savings of their husbands. The situation is grimmer for the women in the unrecognized sector where basically 95 per cent of Indian populations live. With little or no saving, no steady stream of income, the poor women live at the mercy of other members of the family.

#### **4.2 Social & Psychological issues**

With the increasing urbanization and employment in organized sector, Indian family system is moving to a nuclear family structure, the age-old support systems that sustained the older generation are being dismantled while new social structures are not yet widow friendly. Schemes like Widow Pension Schemes and National Old Age Pension Scheme are inadequate compared to the demand on ground. Psychological issues are routinely faced even by the widows of the so-called higher echelons of the society. Till date, widows are accused of being 'responsible' for the death of their husband and described as the curse of the family. They are forced to obey restrictive dress code and behaviour and have bland food, observe fast on particular days, etc. These practices are mainly observed by the widows belonging to higher caste.

#### **4.3 Social Security**

There was wide agreement among the conference participants that social security should be considered in a broad sense, to include education and health for all, and that the Government of India should invest in developing social security system as an important dimension of economic development. Some participants called for comprehensive social security schemes for widows. S. Guhan offered a framework for viewing comprehensive social security for widows within the context of broader antipoverty and pro-women policies: a gradation of measures that proceed from wider to narrower specificity.

## 5. Socio economic status of widows before and after widowhood

Women of contemporary society have undergone change according to the changes that have taken place in the society. Changes so far as women are concerned are slow, qualitatively low and not in uniform in manner. In analytical thinking of the concept of women is a misleading one. There are many concepts related to women such as wife, housewife, working women, widow etc. Of these, widow is a value-loaded concept throughout the history, it is universal in nature in having values attached to it according to the socio cultural context. In the social stratification women are in the lower stratum and within it the widows occupy the lowest position as they are prohibited to move in the mainstream. The status of the widows largely depends upon the socio- economic background of the widow. It can be said that widows in general are treated as a backward community. The attitudes towards widows are yet to be changed and for this the prevailing prejudice are to wiped out from the society. The traditions which exist in society underestimate women and do not take widows as part of the main society. The customs and beliefs are not uniform as they differ from one community to other and all cultures have strict rules and regulations to control them.

It is well established tradition; the widows are not to be remarried. Remarriage of a widow is a taboo in all the cultures. Irrespective of their age or cultural background, the widows are supposed to live as dependents of members of the family .The freedom she enjoyed during married life was suddenly taken away.This transformation depends upon their economic background social background including education, ,caste, region etc. The status of the women undergoes drastic changes in her life stages. When a girl attains puberty she is given a status. When she enters family life she is treated as a mature woman who should look after entire household, but when a widow becomes she is expected to relinquish her worldly attachments. Thus social economic status also changes after her husband's death. Social economic background is an independent variable that is worth analyzing in this study as it changes the status of widow to a great extent .Religion and caste play an important role in determining in the status of a widow.

### 5.1 Social Impact of Widowhood

Patriarchal societies recognize widowhood in cultural contexts but do not recognize them in the discourse of poverty, as explained by Khanna. This statement is far more relevant to non-Western countries, such as Africa and Asia, than to Western countries, though the issue of widowhood is a global one. In India, there are more than 42.2 million known present widows—more than the total population of many small European countries. In Vietnam, that number is 4.7 million, in Brazil it is 5.6 million, and in Indonesia it is 1.2 million known present widows. It is due to patriarchal views and the single cultural attribution to widowhood that political change in this important discussion is minimal across nations. No government wants to touch the “Pandora’s box” of cultural issues. This is a major concern because stigmatization and cultural norms are critical factors that contribute to economic vulnerability. In regions such as Ghana, the husband’s death signifies the social death of the widow as well. As Dr. Joyce Akumaa Dongotey-Padi, Ghanaian women’s rights leader, explained, the widow no longer possesses any rights because her identity was so tethered to that of her husband’s. Often she is blamed for his death and must repent for her mistakes. She is no longer seen as a functioning member of society.

Furthermore, as discussed by Owen, social stigmatization is perpetuated at young ages. There has been a large increase in the population of widows, because of a parallel increase in young widows due to child marriage practices that are still part of cultural norms in many regions of the world. When young widowhood occurs, the future of the country is put into jeopardy for the simple reason that young individuals are supposed to be the future of any country and a significant percentage of these young individuals are widowed, economically disempowered, and socially excluded. Furthermore, without education, training, and the means to support themselves, many widows are forced to take their children out of school. Most often, the girl is taken out of school first due to the social belief that the boy will take care of his parents when he grows older. However, in some cases the boy is taken by the extended family because he is treated as an asset—an heir to the inheritance left by his father. As widows continue to struggle financially and are unable to support their children, they are coerced to selling them in some countries, such as in Afghanistan. Due to lack of support from the society and ignorance on the part of the widows, children often end up in prostitution or commit crime. The lack of support and means to live, results in the spread of diseases, which further exacerbates the problem.

## 5.2 Economic Impact of Widowhood

The social symptoms of widowhood, in combination with the overarching disempowerment of women from birth, leads to economic instability for widows. The widows with children further feel the impacts of disempowerment as resources required to sustain their families become scarce. Ibrahim-Leathers stresses that economic empowerment of women by helping them realize their potential and by providing those with a small source of capital to put their goals into gear can effectively help combat the social and humanitarian issues that arise from widowhood. The economic crisis sits squarely in between the social crisis that is an element of causation and the humanitarian crisis that emerges as a result of the economic vulnerability as pointed out by Khanna. “Cultural and social discrimination of widows is directly proportional to their economic vulnerability.” This direct proportionality is greater in patriarchal societies due to heightened economic vulnerability caused by structural inequalities in these societies, such as skewed patriarchal inheritance laws that leave widows economically dependent on others or incapable of supporting their own families due to the lack of resources or opportunities.

In 2015, the Global Fund for Widows surveyed widows in Egypt, who make up a staggering thirty-six percent of the female population living at or below the poverty line. Fifty-three percent of these widows are under the age of 39, with children, and they only receive \$1.20 from their government to feed their family. Fifty-three percent of these women have no source of income, but large burdens of debt that leaves them vulnerable and eighty-two percent of these women want to start their own business, but lack the necessary capital to do so. Due to their inability to become economically independent as a result of social exclusion, absence of familial support, or lack of education, they become victims of violence and humanitarian injustices.

As stated by Zarin Hainsworth, Chair of National Women’s Association in the UK and representative from Widows Rights International, economic vulnerability exacerbates social and cultural stigmatism. Recalling the points made by Khanna about the direct relationship between economic dependence and cultural stigmatization, as economic vulnerability is combated with economic empowerment and related resources



such as capital and education, social and cultural stigmatization is also etched out of the lives of widows. Further, if economic empowerment does indeed underscore social, cultural stigmatization, it is pragmatic to begin change with the most vulnerable of populations—“with the last woman first.” In patriarchal societies, women are stigmatized based on their relationship or lack thereof with a man. Thereby, single women in those societies are in fact the last women in line. The further stigmas attached to widows puts them at the very end of this spectrum. Therefore, it makes economic sense to empower the most vulnerable population—widows—first if we want to achieve a major part of the sustainable development goals. To do so, we must help create visibility to this real issue that is the problem of widowhood.

Hainsworth suggests that widow organizations work together to find data, push legislation, and support the economic empowerment of women. The statistics available and readily collected by organizations and governments are not complete and thereby are not fully representative of this massive issue. In some instances, women fear speaking out and feel ashamed of their widowhood status, which is closely attributed to the early disempowerment of widows. In other instances, a census has simply not been conducted in over a decade resulting in a massive amount of undocumented widows. The veil of invisibility must be lifted. As Khanna stated, “we must push our governments on SDG 5 (achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls) linked with SDG 1 (end poverty in all its forms everywhere), while encouraging that single women households are put squarely on the discourse of poverty eradication.” Actions taken by the government to combat this root cause of poverty would increase the effectiveness of social programs and signify the changing of cultural stigmatization.

## 6. Conclusion

The position of a widow in society is a crucial topic which sociologists discuss and elucidate. The treatment which she receives is often an index to the attitudes of society towards women as a class. Several factors are responsible for the deprived position of widows. There is no uniform pattern of widowhood either in terms of conditions leading to such a phenomenon or in terms of the consequences pattern. There is also no uniform lifestyle for widows.

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