



## REVIEW ARTICLE ON TRADITIONAL PRACTICES AND ATTITUDE OF PEOPLE TOWARDS WIDOWS

### KEYWORDS

attitude, widows, traditional practices

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**ABSTRACT** Widows in India are facing a lot of problems and hardships in the family and society because of traditional norms, cultural practices and beliefs in the society. Women, particularly widows in India are the victims of social stigma. Discrimination of widows is a common phenomenon. Some of the major problems they face are, responsibility of child-bearing, lack of companionship, violence against widows, hindrances in remarriage, control over sexuality, victimization, and psycho-social adjustment with her own family and society. Provision of facilities like community education centers, free education facilities, for widow's children and scholarship for children's vocational training for widows, financial help from Government, preference for jobs for children of widows and widows themselves and encourage the widow remarriage. There should be income generating programs, loan of credit schemes for widows.

### INTRODUCTION

Widows in India are facing a lot of problems and hardships in the family and society because of traditional norms, cultural practices and beliefs in the society. Women, particularly widows in India are the victims of social stigma. Discrimination of widows is a common phenomenon. Some of the major problems they face are, responsibility of child-bearing, lack of companionship, violence against widows, hindrances in remarriage, control over sexuality, victimization, and psycho-social adjustment with her own family and society. Child-marriage, polygamy, the wide age-gap between men and women, war and increasing rate of AIDS have greatly increased the number of widows, especially young ones (1). Widowhood can lead to intense frustration among widows resulting in stress and depression.

The aim of this study was to review the literature on traditional practices and attitude towards widows.

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

**In India**, there are a variety of social practices, customs, attitudes, and beliefs (2) that affect the status and well-being of widows. For example, following the death of their husband, women are often expected to undergo a period of seclusion (remaining in a remote room in the home), followed by confinement to the home (or village) for a period of time, as well as permanently changing their diets (in particular, avoiding "heating" foods (garam, including meat, eggs, alcohol, onions, and garlic) in favor of "cooling" foods (thanda, including yogurt, rice, milk, and honey) (3). Widows are often also unwelcome at social events, ceremonies, and rituals, and avoided socially because they are considered bad luck. Sati is the most extreme example of such practices.

According to tradition, they may shave their heads, wear only plain clothing, and eat only a single meal each day, and their presence at family public functions is forbidden (4). The widows are often reduced to begging, prostitution, and chanting hymns for up to eight hours in order to earn a handful of lentils and rice (5,6).

It was found that in a study that (7) majority of men and women and widows had favourable attitude towards marriage. When widows were asked about their own remarriage, very few of them expressed that they were willing to remarry. The social restraints towards remarriage were concern for children's welfares, too old to remarry; children's are too old and afraid of society. The windowed women face various economic, social and psychological problems. Many widows were not get any sort of support either by husband still relative or by the government.

Among the Rajputs, in the classic sati area of modern India, the widow spends a year in penance, sleeping in one corner of a tiny room

- "she of the corner" (kunevali) is an insult (11). The widow may be the object of sexual abuse within the extended family. Some are sent off to Vrindavan, Uttar Pradesh, the "city of widows" (12,13), where 8-10,000 widows now spend their time chanting mantras to Lord Krishna (four hours of chanting for a cupful of rice and two rupees). Reportedly, the ashrams where they live are often centres of money-laundering through faked "donations". Younger widows, who may be as young as ten years old, may be sold off by the ashram managers, as sex-slaves to local landowners or straight into brothels. In Varanasi, the holy city, there may be 20,000-60,000 widows in a similar situation.

Newly married women were not allowed to talk to them (14), or drink water or eat anything from their hands as this was a curse that they would not conceive. Hence widowhood is considered a curse in orthodox India. They are devoid of eating good food, wearing a kumkum (symbol of marriage of a Hindu woman), shun all jewellery. They are expected to keep various fast to wash away their sins and expected to spend the rest of their lives in religious activities.

Another study (8) reported that many **Bangladeshi** widows, especially those who are illiterate and live in rural areas, are subject to oppressive patriarchal traditions. They are often deprived of their rightful inheritance. According to a recent report conducted by Centre for Dhaka and Children Studies, many rural widows receive nothing from their in-laws and are often victims of violence, evicted from their homes and robbed of their household possessions. For the poor illiterate widows, the opportunities for working outside are limited to domestic service, agricultural related work and begging (9). The Bangladesh society sanctions widow remarriage, remarriages occur all the time but it is not as easy as it may appear. Polygamy is prevalent in Bangladesh. A man may marry the deceased brother's wife or the widow of some other person but there is discrimination against her (10). She is given a much lower status than the wife.

**In Africa**, there are different widowhood practices (15). A widow who shows interest in another male is in danger of being regarded as a prostitute. She is branded as evil because by surviving her husband she is suspected of causing his death. She may be persecuted and accused of witchcraft (16). In northern Ghana, when a man dies his widow or widows must all stay inside, sitting alone, stripped naked with leaves on their private parts. They are taken out naked, accompanied by an old lady, to drink a special brew. After the funeral, the widows are asked whom they wished to marry. They invariably have little choice, for if a man can get to sleep with one of them and can tell a close relative of his success he will be given the widow as his wife (17).

A widow, in a study conducted by (18), narrated 'In fact several kinds

*of dehumanising treatments were meted out to me. Before my husband was buried, I was locked up with his corpse for three hours with the belief that if I killed him, I would die there. I was then forced to sleep in the grave yard for two days after his burial to finally convince them that I did not kill my husband'.*

In most parts of the Igbo society, the early parts of the mourning period are usually the most rigorous. During the first 28 days, the widow is not allowed to go to the stream to fetch water or to the market or enter the farmland. A typical Igbo widow during this period of seclusion and before the burial of the dead husband must refrain from washing herself, and sits on the ground. Her food is prepared separately and fed to her by another widow from either a broken or an old plate. These pots and plates are used because they are thrown away after the period of the seclusion. The second part of the seclusion begins after the first 28 days and runs for one year. During this whole period and as part of the seclusion, the widow must not have sex and should she become pregnant during the period, it could lead to a serious breach of taboo, which calls for its own purification. Practices like shaving the widow's hair and washing her in herbs is believed to wash away the deceased spirit and the general bad luck associated with the loss of a husband (19). A widow who refuses to perform the widowhood rituals because of her Christian religious beliefs is frowned upon by the women in the community and even excommunicated from the villages. In some communities, properties of the deceased husband are inherited by his sisters' sons or nephews, while the widows and their children are left to fend for themselves or to seek support from their own matrilineal clan.

**In Women 2000(20)**, one finds the following negative and painful statements by widows from some developing countries:

*'We are considered bad omens. We are excluded from all auspicious events' (Lakshmi, Rajasthan, India, Aparajita Newsletter 1995).*

*'I am accused of being a witch who killed her husband' (Terezinha, Zambezia Province, Mozambique, 1997).*

*'We have no shelter; my children can no longer go to school' (Ishrat, Bangladesh, 1995).*

*'We are treated like animals just because we are widows' (Angela, Nigeria, 1999).*

*'I and my children were kicked out of the house and beaten by the brothers-in-law' (Seodhi, Malawi, 1994).*

## CONCLUSION

Provision of facilities like community education centers, free education facilities, for widow's children and scholarship for children's vocational training for widows, financial help from Government, preference for jobs for children of widows and widows themselves and encourage the widow remarriage. There should be income generating programs, loan of credit schemes for widows. There should be awareness among women about the various policies programs and facilities available for the needy people.

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