



ISSN: 0976-3031

Available Online at <http://www.recentscientific.com>

CODEN: IJRSFP (USA)

International Journal of Recent Scientific Research
Vol. 8, Issue, 7, pp. 18269-18273, July, 2017

**International Journal of
Recent Scientific
Research**

DOI: 10.24327/IJRSR

Research Article

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF WIDOWS AND WIDOWERS IN INDIA

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24327/ijrsr.2017.0807.0480>

ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 17th April, 2017
Received in revised form 21st
May, 2017
Accepted 05th June, 2017
Published online 28th July, 2017

Key Words:

Widow, Widower, Gender Inequality

ABSTRACT

A widow is a woman whose spouse has died, while a widower is a man in that situation. The state of having lost one's spouse to death is termed as widowhood. This term "widowhood" can be used for either sex. In common usage both the sexes are termed as widowed. The treatment of widows around the world varies, but unequal benefits and treatment generally received by widows compared to those received by widowers globally has an issue of concern for social scientists. Widowhood is both a crisis and a problem. In the suddenness and in the sea change that it wrought in the life of a woman, it is a crisis. The number of 'Widowed' persons, mostly females, is more than 44 million in the country according to the 2001 census. The purpose of the present paper is to showcase the life of the widows in comparison to its counter parts, the widowers in India. It also focuses on the unequal treatment of the widows on the basis of gender in the present society. The following paper is based on secondary data and not on any theoretical propositions.

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INTRODUCTION

A widow is a woman who may be one who has no issues and who has been widowed one or two years after her marriage; or she may be one who becomes a widow after a period of five to ten years and has one or two small children to support, or she may be one who is above 50 years of age. For generations women in India have been regarded as one of the most disadvantaged sections of the society. The low status of the women can be traced back to post-Vedic era when women were debarred from many socio-religious functions and depending upon certain circumstances they were regarded as impure. Subsequently, more restrictions were put on women. But somehow, this low status of women increased and for women relating to lower castes like shudras there were several taboos placed on them. Subsequently, widows were started to be seen as evil across all the social classes. Several strict taboos were placed on them relating to food and socio-religious behaviour. Somewhere in the medieval period the heinous practice of sati was started in some parts of Rajputana and later spread to many parts of the country. Compelled by this pathetic situation many socio-religious movements were launched to abolish sati and advocating widow remarriage. But somehow even after more than one and half centuries nothing much has changed for the widows who are shunned at socio-religious functions and taboos on. In a patriarchal society like India women are one of

the most disadvantaged groups who are denied the basic rights by the society. The women belonging to the marginalized communities like Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribes and other backward classes are doubly disadvantaged. First, they are disadvantaged because they belong to marginalized section of the society and second they are women.

Objectives of the Study: The objectives of the study are mentioned below:

1. To focus mainly on the life of the widows in comparison to its counterparts, the widowers in India.
2. To highlight the unequal treatment meted out to the widows on the basis of gender in the present Indian society.
3. To showcase the major problems faced by widows in India.
4. To study the manifold aspects of deprivation of widows in India.

Methods used for the Study

The present paper is totally based on secondary data. The main concern is on the widows and the widowers inhabiting India. The data was drawn from various sources which have been duly acknowledged. Information on and various issues related to the concerned topic was obtained by consulting the websites

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concerned. The reports of the Government of India were also referred for obtaining the necessary data.

Major problems faced by widows in India

Indian family as a social institution is well known for the emotional and physical support that it provides, for its extended members, many a time but it fails to respond the needs of women, especially for women in difficult circumstances e.g. for widows. A Hindu widow is stigmatized as a woman who has taken her husband's life. Under ancient law, her husband is God and when he dies, she is expected to observe a life full of grief. The extreme consequences of these beliefs are the practice of "SATI"-where a wife is forced to immolate herself on the burning pyre of her deceased husband. Broadly speaking, the widows in the North suffer greater discrimination and marginalization than widows in the south. A widow from a relatively well-up family may be subject to greater cruelty and abuse by her in-laws than a lower caste widow who are free enough to work outside in the public space and to remarry. Widow neither gets socio-economic support nor do they get counseling and emotional support in distress from family and society. Indian widows are often invisible, not least in relation to their economic contribution and unpaid family work in household. In our country widows are far more away from pension scheme benefits due to corruption. Thus, they are facing a number of problems in their life.

The Manifold Aspects of Deprivation of Widows

1. **Lack of Inheritance Rights:** Although the "Hindu succession Act" 1969 has made women eligible to inherit equally with men but in reality they are deprived of any legal rights. Patrilocal residence and patrilineal inheritance is fundamental source of the poverty and marginalization of Indian widows.
2. **Prohibition of Remarriage:** Some castes prohibit remarriage of widows. Others allow it provided that it is within the family. If a widow marries away, she loses to her children as well as property. It is more likely that among the higher caste widow remarriage is forbidden.
3. **Observation of Mourning Rites:** Widows are bound to observe some mourning rites in the family and society. They have to wear white sarees and avoid wearing Kukum and jewellery. Besides, they have to live on vegetarian diet. They remain in seclusion avoiding social gatherings such as wedding ceremony and temple worship. Many of these mourning rites, if forced in extreme, are responsible for their high morbidity and mortality.
4. **Victim of violence:** In many parts of India, particularly in tribal communities, widows are sometimes killed as witches. The underlying motivation is economic and the accusers tend to be the male family members. Rape, forced marriage and sexual abuse are common problems in case of widows.
5. **Economic Hardships:** Many widows come across economic hardships during their life. They are bound to send their children out to work to earn income instead of sending them to school. Some widows are forced to adopt prostitution and they get infected by STD easily. Employment opportunities for widows are very low

especially because of the limitations on mobility and gender division of labour.

Widows in a Patriarchal Society

Widows in India are facing lot of problems and hardships in the family and society because of traditional norms, cultural practices and beliefs. In a patriarchal Hindu society in which women derive their status from their husbands, widows have always been regarded as symbols of misfortune, and their presence was thought to be inauspicious in happy occasions. They were forced to withdraw completely from the social life of the community and were made to follow a severe disciplined life which made their existence a virtual social death. Efforts were made during the early colonial period to work toward reforms to improve the condition of widows in India. Yet, considerable gender discrimination exists in India over the centuries. Women, particularly widows in India are the victims of social stigma. Discrimination of widows is a common phenomenon which is deep rooted in the traditional values and beliefs of the community. Widows are found to have abundance of problems all over the world due to the doctrine of patriarchy and social debasement. Some of the major problems they face are responsibility of child-bearing, lack of companionship, sexual violence, hindrances in remarriage, control over sexuality and psycho-social adjustment with her own family and society. In all the developing countries, millions of widows and their children live in the condition of acute insecurity, deprivation and violence. Even though we have Civil laws of inheritance, customary laws relating to marriage and inheritance, land ownership and child custody there is a huge gap between theory and practice. The problem gets worse in case of a widow, especially if a woman loses her husband at a very young age. In that scenario, the women are looked upon as a burden by the entire family and much worse she is forced to lead a life of a recluse. Even the mourning of the death of a son lasts only a few days or a few months, the widow is condemned to mourn his death for life. Strict social customs and rituals are imposed on them to wash the sins of being a widow. Gone are the days, when a widow was forced to sit on the pyres of her parting husband. Even though there are legal protection for inheritance of property and remarriage in actual practice it is missing.

Effects of Gender Hierarchy on the Widowed

In India and probably elsewhere irrespective of religion, caste, class and education, millions of widows are deprived of their universally acknowledged human rights. Their essential needs like food, shelter and clothes are forbidden. A few women are forced to face sexual harassment from their in-laws. Widows' needs are marginalized in Indian society and they are not taken into mainstream. Even in an educated civilized society, they are isolated and placed under several restrictions. Because of the question of control over their sexuality, widowhood is insisted on women to confine them in their homes. They are not allowed to attend any social and religious functions and so they restrict their right to live in public sphere. Gender hierarchy is deep rooted in Indian culture. Compared to widowers, widows have much more restriction in the society. Widowers have the freedom to move everywhere as well as to participate in social functions.

The status of women in modern India is a sort of a paradox. If on one hand she is at the peak of ladder of success, on the other hand she is mutely suffering the violence afflicted on her by her own family members. As compared with past women in modern times have achieved a lot but in reality they have to still travel a long way. Their path is full of roadblocks. The women have left the secured domain of their home and are now in the battlefield of life, fully armored with their talent. They had proven themselves. But in India they are yet to get their dues. The sex ratio of India shows that the Indian society is still prejudiced against female. There are 933 females per thousand males in India according to the census of 2001, which is much below the world average of 990 females. There are many problems which women in India have to go through daily. These problems have become the part and parcel of life of Indian women and some of them have accepted them as their fate. Indian government has enacted numerous laws to protect widow's rights, including prohibitions against traditional practices for which India has been discredited, such as the burning of widows (Sati). Whereas in India's contemporary culture, especially in the modern urban middle-class, these societal norms have given way to a more righteous conduct, the enforcement of the law continues to be challenging, where there are regional, religious or caste variants of family law, which tend to escape government jurisdiction. In India, there are three times as many widows than widowers. 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.

The Curse of Being Widowed

A widow is a person who is subjected to innumerable miseries not due to her fault but due to ignorance, superstition and the social custom followed by the patriarchal society, her agony and sufferings have not been reduced even after the passage of time. Due to the deep recorded operation of patriarchy, widows have been silently suffering in the society. The problem of widowhood has elicited considerable interest in the minds of researchers in recent times. In the Indian context, the problems assume considerable importance, as the age difference between husband and wife is higher and widow-remarriage is highly restricted. Hence, in order to understand the complex phenomenon of widowhood, a systematic study of various problems faced by widows, the causes, the consequences and the effects on the personality of widows, the difficulties in adapting widowhood and how they will manage to overcome the problems, patriarchal society creating new gender roles and socially and culturally restricted socialization practices against widows, and the devaluation of widow's life. The familial and societal lives of widows are also marginalized them due to rapid development of modernization, liberalization, technological advancement etc. Widowhood can lead to intense frustration among widows resulting in stress, depression and other forms of adaptive behaviour. If their pattern of reactions is to frustration is not appropriate, it becomes imperative to look into the individual psychological factors of the widows. These psychological factors determine the pattern of reaction to frustration among widows in comparison to married women and the difference in the reaction pattern of widows and married women. Widowhood in India is often described as a

definitive and tragic moment in a women's life-one in which her identity is stripped away with the death of her husband.

Table 1 Total number of widows as per Census 2001

Sl. No.	Name of State/UT	Number of Widows
	INDIA (TOTAL)	34289729
1	Jammu & Kashmir	196604
2	Himachal Pradesh	229664
3	Punjab	662113
4	Chandigarh	16788
5	Uttarakhand	293331
6	Haryana	533974
7	Delhi	305940
8	Rajasthan	1589726
9	Uttar Pradesh	3763168
10	Bihar	1887575
11	Sikkim	10005
12	Arunachal Pradesh	25639
13	Nagaland	26516
14	Manipur	59459
15	Mizoram	20373
16	Tripura	123817
17	Meghalaya	59604
18	Assam	869005
19	West Bengal	3155365
20	Jharkhand	822827
21	Odisha	1370123
22	Chhattisgarh	771106
23	Madhya Pradesh	1752228
24	Gujarat	1614413
25	Daman & Diu	5511
26	Dadra and Nagar Haveli	4979
27	Maharashtra	3726735
28	Andhra Pradesh	3270964
29	Karnataka	2322843
30	Goa	69052
31	Lakshadweep	2136
32	Kerala	1690508
33	Tamil Nadu	2976137
34	Puducherry	53040
35	Andaman & Nicobar Islands	8461

NSAP (National Social Assistance Programme)

The Ministry of Rural Development is administering the National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP). These schemes are for the households living Below Poverty Line (BPL) fulfilling the eligibility criteria prescribed by the Government of India. Indira Gandhi National Widow Pension Scheme (IGNWPS) is for the BPL widows who are of the age of 40 years and above. The schemes mentioned are State funded schemes. The following table shows the distribution of Widowed Persons by Sex in India 1901-2001 in %

Table 2 Trends in Widowhood

Year	Males	Females
1901	5.4 (6523)	18.0 (21125)
1911	5.4 (6933)	17.3 (21402)
1921	6.4 (8227)	17.5 (23726)
1931	5.4 (7718)	15.5 (23977)
1941	5.7 (9330)	15.1 (26509)
1951	5.1 (9462)	12.8 (22471)
1961	3.6 (9223)	10.8 (24111)
1971	3.2 (9041)	9.2 (24439)
1981	2.7 (9143)	8.5 (27279)
1991	2.1 (9126)	6.5 (27631)
2001	1.8 (10717)	6.9 (36632)

Source: IGNWPS

From the above table it is seen that the % of widows was 10.8 in 1961 and declined to 6.9 in 2001 and the % of widower also declined from 3.6 in 1961 to 1.8 in 2001, indicating a decrease of 36% for widows and 50% for widowers. (Courtesy: Census

2001). The following table shows the distribution of Widows, India & Major States, and 1961-2001 in %

state of holy asceticism. This system of marriage places women in a situation of vulnerability after their husband's death,

Table 3 State-Wise Distribution of Widowhood in India

States	Males(Widower)					Females(Widow)				
	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001
India	3.69	2.94	2.43	1.93	1.8	10.82	8.86	8.06	6.50	6.9
Andhra Pradesh	3.41	2.70	2.17	1.55	1.5	13.64	22.66	10.22	8.38	8.7
Bihar	3.94	3.22	2.66	2.03	2.0	10.91	8.65	7.30	4.83	4.7
Gujarat	3.11	2.34	2.00	1.72	1.9	9.27	7.71	6.99	5.95	6.6
Haryana	NA	3.24	2.62	1.90	1.9	NA	5.33	5.00	4.37	5.5
Karnataka	3.16	2.27	1.82	1.43	1.3	12.36	10.35	9.59	8.27	9.0
Kerala	1.71	1.19	1.16	0.96	1.2	10.04	8.99	9.13	8.76	10.3
Madhya Pradesh	3.92	3.21	2.68	2.23	2.1	11.01	8.81	7.76	6.20	6.1
Maharashtra	3.13	2.14	1.77	1.43	1.4	11.49	9.30	8.73	7.41	8.0
Orissa	2.86	2.29	2.30	2.05	1.8	12.03	9.05	9.01	7.36	7.6
Punjab	4.67	3.31	2.82	2.16	2.1	7.16	5.54	5.42	4.62	5.8
Rajasthan	3.98	3.11	2.56	2.10	1.9	9.52	7.80	7.12	5.79	5.9
Tamil Nadu	3.15	2.56	2.30	2.04	2.0	12.78	10.94	10.11	8.77	9.6
Uttar Pradesh	5.42	4.69	3.78	3.00	2.6	9.54	7.58	6.43	4.56	4.8
West Bengal	2.67	2.17	1.42	1.18	1.1	12.36	9.80	9.20	7.81	8.2

Source: Census 2001

It has been found from the above table that the rate of widowhood is higher among the southern states as compared to northern states in India. It is also to be noted that states like U.P. & Rajasthan which are known to have high mortality show the lower proportion of widowhood among females, while states like Kerala, Karnataka & Tamil Nadu having low mortality showed a higher proportion of widows. Therefore, it can be said that in comparison to southern states, the northern states allow more for widow remarriages and the age difference and gender-gap between the spouses is higher in the southern states.

CONCLUSION

Lastly, even after decades of struggles by social reformers and passing of progressive legislation's like Sati Abolish Act 1829, The Hindu Widow Remarriage Act 1856, etc. Widows are still one of the marginalized sections of the society with least importance in public and private spheres. The problem of widowhood in India is critical both in terms of its emotional depth as well as sheer number of people caught in the cruel practice. Back in 2001, out of a total Indian population of 102 crore, 18.5 lakh people or 0.7% was widowed. By 2011 this percentage has jumped to 4.6%, according to census 2011 marriage data. 5.6 crore out of 121 crore are now widowed, with women hugely outnumbering men. Widows have been the most disadvantaged persons in India society and the new numbers should alert policy makers to this dimension of an ageing population.

Specifically, 8.7% of the ever-married population is widowed while less than 1% is separated or divorced. Most of the widowed come from the Southern states which have low fertility, low mortality and an ageing population. Uttar Pradesh may lead in absolute numbers given its population, but the Southern states have the highest percentage of the ever-married population widowed. Puducherry with 11.7%, Kerala with 11.3%, Tamil Nadu with 10.9%, Andhra Pradesh (undivided back in 2011) with 10.3% scores over Uttar Pradesh that stands at 8%. Delhi is even lower at 6.8% and Bihar at 6.6%. The ideal Hindu widow remains with her in-laws-a result of the patrilocal system of marriage in most of India-embodiment of this

particularly if they do not have any income: they can neither reintegrate with their parental family, nor do they necessarily receive adequate support to live contentedly in their husband's house.

Within the normative structure of Brahmin gender roles is the assumption that the ban on remarriage of widows is reserved as a privilege for the higher castes. Less acceptable forms of marriage, derived from the eight forms listed in the Hindu shastras were ascribed to the lower castes, namely a system of remarriage is prevalent among the agriculturalists. Because women in these societies are seen as producers-and reproducers of producers-their continued sexual activity after widowhood is viewed in parallel to the success of their economy. For these reasons, a historical divide has been created between terms of widowhood for the higher and lower castes. Because of the financial considerations, many widows from lower-income families are not able to remain in the house of their in-laws without working or, in some circumstances, getting remarried. Most often, if these women cannot, or do not wish to, work or remarry, they will leave their family structure for a variety of reasons. The Acts of 1937, 1956 and 2005 of the Indian Constitution aim at eliminating gender discrimination. However, the Indian Constitutional laws are not complied with because of the ignorance of the Indians. The following solutions are already enshrined in the Constitution of India and can serve as solutions for widows in India:

- There are provisions to ensure gender equality under the Constitution but most widows are not aware of their rights. If there is an endeavour that is made to educate widows, it will be possible for them to assert their rights and empower themselves.
- The widow's right to land and property can be recognized under the Indian constitutional laws, along with her right to equality and the right to live with dignity.

Further, the annual data of violence and abuse of widows in India should be compiled and presented before legislators in the Parliament so as to initiate social legislations that will protect their rights.

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How to cite this article:

Barnali Sharma and Usha Rani Boro.2017, A Comparative Analysis of Widows And Widowers In India. *Int J Recent Sci Res*. 8(7), pp. 18269-18273. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24327/ijrsr.2017.0807.0480>
