

Indepth Interview of the Status of Widows in Rural Areas of Pondicherry

Devi Kittu*, Rotti S. B**

*Department of Community Medicine, Melmaruvathur Adhi Parasakthi Institute of Medical Sciences and Research

** Department of Community Medicine, Melmaruvathur Adhi Parasakthi Institute of Medical Sciences and Research

Abstract- INTRODUCTION: In India, National Family Health Survey: (NFHS - 2) data has given an estimate that there are more than 33 million widows comprising of 8% of the total female population.¹ The widows are surrounded by cultural and social practices that seldom she can come out from them. **OBJECTIVES:** To determine the social, cultural deprivation faced by them after widowhood and to describe their attitudes towards widow's remarriage. **RESULTS:** Widows opined that younger widows without children can remarry. Widows said their relatives treated them badly and were blamed for the death of the husbands. The widows felt shocked and angered towards the last rites. Majority of widows did not have bank account. Majority of the older widows opined that getting rice for food itself was difficult, but for the younger widows educating their children was difficult to be met. Widows who had attained widowhood after 50 years opined that they expected the government to supply rice. Younger widows emphasized the government should give some loan for their survival. **CONCLUSION:** Majority of the widows were socially and culturally deprived.

Index Terms- Widows, In-depth interview, Remarriage, Pondicherry

I. INTRODUCTION

In India, National Family Health Survey: (NFHS - 2) data has given an estimate that there are more than 33 million widows comprising of 8% of the total female population. According to Census 1991, more than 65% of widows in the age group of 60 and above were in the states of Goa, Assam, Karnataka, West Bengal, Andra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu.¹

II. DESCRIPTION OF THE PROBLEM

The death of a woman's husband marks her transition from a wife to a widow. In the Hindu society of India and Nepal, a widow was physically alive but socially dead. The widows are marginalized in terms of property rights, inheritance and custody of her children. The situations are similar in almost all the South Asian countries.²

The widows are surrounded by cultural and social practices that seldom she can come out from them. The widows are tolerated but never welcomed in the society. Upon widowhood, most widows in rural India are subject to economic decline, social isolation and related deprivation. In spite, of the financial assistance that is available for widows who remarry, the society

is not positive even today towards widow's remarriage. Due to growing globalization, the social changes which occur are fast but few areas which remain unchanged or where the change is slow is marriage and related customs, especially widow's remarriage.

OBJECTIVES:

1. To determine the social and cultural deprivation faced by them after widowhood.
2. To describe the attitudes and awareness to social issues like widow's remarriage.
3. To determine the awareness of benefits provided to them by the government and suggestions for improvement.

III. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was carried out in the service area of Jawaharlal Institute Rural Health Center (JIRHC) which the rural field practice area of Department of Preventive and Social Medicine, Jawaharlal Institute of Postgraduate Medical Education and Research Center (JIPMER), Pondicherry.

Parameters studied:

1. Attitude towards remarriage
2. Reasons for unwillingness to remarry
3. Attitude of relatives towards widows
4. Reaction of society towards widowhood
5. Children's Negative Behaviour/Instances Of Change/Reasons
6. Attitude Towards Last Rites
7. Bank Account/Ration Card
8. Awareness Of The Benefits And Its Satisfaction/ Problems In Getting The Benefits
9. Expenditure Difficult To Meet
10. Expectation From The Government For Their Welfare
11. Disturbed By Other Males

Brief Procedure:

The study was conducted in the two villages of Jawaharlal Institute Rural Health Center (JIRHC) viz., Ramanathapuram and Pilliarkuppam. In-depth interview was conducted among ten of the widows regarding widow's remarriage, social deprivation in detail and their satisfaction of the incentives provided to them by the government. The interview schedule was pretested other village outside the service area. After making a few modifications based on the responses obtained, the interview

schedule was finalized. The information collected was recorded in their own language using a recorder. All the data was collected by the chief investigator under the supervision of co-investigator.

IV. RESULTS

INDEPTH-INTERVIEW

ATTITUDE TOWARD REMARRIAGE

OVERALL

Overall irrespective of the age of attainment of widowhood the widows had similar views regarding remarriage only younger widows without children who would fall within the preview of the societal norms. They were of the opinion that younger widows could think of remarriage, of course, with the support of their parents. Otherwise living without remarriage was the societal norm.

REASONS FOR UNWILLINGNESS TO REMARRY

OVERALL

Overall, all the widows gave the similar reason for not getting married again. But still the burden was greater with the younger widows who had to bring their children by educating them and getting them married. Two of the respondents also added that since they faced lot of difficulties in their first marriage they didn't want to marry again.

ATTITUDE OF THE RELATIVES TOWARDS WIDOWS

OVERALL

Overall, majority of the widows who had attained widowhood after 50 years said that although their relatives treated them badly they did not consider it as it was within the societal norms. However, younger widows opined that they felt sad and depressed the way the relatives treated them badly.

REACTION OF THE SOCIETY TOWARDS WIDOWHOOD

OVERALL

Overall, irrespective of age the widows opined that they were treated badly by the society but the emphasis was more with the younger widows whom some, were blamed for the death of the husbands.

CHILDREN'S NEGATIVE BEHAVIOUR/ INSTANCES OF CHANGE/REASONS

OVERALL

Overall, majority of widows did not find any change in their children's behaviour. But one of the younger widows said that her son got married on his own, as there was no male member to check his activities.

ATTITUDE TOWARDS LAST RITES

OVERALL

Overall, the widows irrespective of the age felt shocked and angered about the last rites but they felt that it was necessary as it was ongoing in a society. But one of the younger widows said that it was not necessary.

BANK ACCOUNT/RATION CARD

OVERALL

Overall, majority of widows did not have bank account. But all of them had a ration card.

AWARENESS OF THE BENEFITS AND ITS SATISFACTION/ PROBLEMS IN GETTING THE BENEFITS

OVERALL

Overall, all the widows perceived that the government did not do anything specific for the widows. Except for a few respondents, they did not get Rs. 10,000/-. Two of the respondents opined that they did not get pension also in spite of the submission of the application long ago.

EXPENDITURE DIFFICULT TO MEET

OVERALL

Overall, there was a difference between the older and younger widows as majority of the older widows opined that getting rice for food itself was difficult, but for the younger widows educating their children and to meet other expenses was difficult.

EXPECTATION FROM THE GOVERNMENT FOR THEIR WELFARE

OVERALL

Overall, there were differences in the expectations from the government towards the welfare of widows. Widows who had attained widowhood after 50 years opined that they expected the government to supply rice similar to handicapped persons. But younger emphasized the government should give some loan for their survival.

DISTURBED BY OTHER MALES

OVERALL

Majority of the widows did not face problem from other males, however few of the younger widows had faced such a problem. They need some protection.

V. DISCUSSION

In-depth interview with the widows found overall irrespective of the age of attainment of widowhood the widows had similar views regarding remarriage giving emphasis that only younger widows without children can remarry which would fall within the preview of the societal norms. Mala Bhandari in his study from Vrindavan and Varanasi observed that 88.75%, 92.5% and 78.75% categorically stated that widows should not remarry. In Varanasi the corresponding figures are 100%, 89.29% and 100% respectively. Very few of them quoted emotional reasons for this (i.e. unable to forget the first husband) 11.25%, 81.25%, 55% in Vrindavan and 53.57%, 42.86%, 92.86% in Varanasi stated that they hate the idea of remarriage. 12.5%, 8.75%, 22.5% in Vrindavan and 28.58%, 42.86%, 92.86% in Varanasi cite religion as opposed to the idea of remarriage.³

The widows were not respected and visited by their family members was lower after widowhood. Overall, majority of the widows who had attained widowhood after 50 years said that although their relatives treated them badly they did not consider it as it was within the societal norms. However younger widows

opined that they felt sad and depressed the way the relatives treated them. One would think that sympathy for a widowed mother would bring a positive change in the behaviour. But the study shows that widows fall even lower on the social scale. This reiterates the fact that widows suffer doubly, as widows and as women. The community based study from Vrindavan and Varanasi found that 8.75% indicating bad behavior towards mother, it rose to 11.25% when the mother becomes a widow. Similarly indifferent behavior rise from 61.25% to 66.25%. Interestingly though 30% claimed to have been treated well by their children before widowhood, this figure fell to 22.5% on widowhood. The same trend was seen among the respondents living in boarding houses and on the streets. Of the respondents in the rehabilitation homes, 15% claimed that no respect had ever been shown to them as wives. This figure increases to 21.25% on widowhood. Similarly 38.75% claimed that they had evoked respect as wives. But the number falls to 32.75% on widowhood. This trend is seen among the widows living in boarding houses and on the streets. Their social isolation were indicated by the fact that 36.25%, 78.75% and 75% of the respondents of Vrindavan in the three sections claimed that relatives and friends never visited them. The corresponding figures for Varanasi were 17.86%, 32.14% and 67.86%.³ Also the other studies consistently showed that the frequency of interaction with friends and emotional support from friends had a positive contribution to the well-being of older adults.⁴

The high figures are a good indication of the influence of social conditioning. It is also interesting to note that changes in life style was not a voluntary choice of most of the respondents, but something that becomes an involuntary decision, motivated more often than not by economic reasons. Social insecurity is a consequence of economic disadvantages; from childhood she is conditioned to think that her very purpose of wearing ornaments or dressing up is for the husband. Along with the economic reasons is also the social conditioning. Not only is her social status decimated but she is also considered inauspicious. On the other hand since she has no social status, she is not welcomed at social functions. The widows are conditioned by society to think that they are inauspicious and will bring ill luck to the newly married couple. Studies from Vrindavan and Varanasi found that women who changed to simple food were 66.25%, 83.75% and 92.5% in all the three sections of Vrindavan. In Varanasi 100% in all the sections stated the same. A majority 96.25% in rehabilitation homes, 98.75% in boarding houses and 97.5% of those on the streets indicated economic reasons for this change in diet. Every respondent in Varanasi reiterated this. Only 1.25% respondents in rehabilitation homes of Vrindavan stated that they started wearing simple clothes because of lack of interest. The corresponding figures in boarding houses and on the streets are 3.75% and 5% respectively. But as high as 96.25%, 96.25% and 92.5% in all the three sections cited economic disadvantages for the change in dressing. But in Varanasi all 100% in all the three sections attributed economic reasons for change in dressing habits. 85.5%, 96.25% and 80% in all three sections of Vrindavan did not wear bangles, flowers or the mangalsutra. In Varanasi, the corresponding figures are 100%, 89.29% and 96.43%. In Vrindavan while 98.75% in rehabilitation homes attended religious functions, the number fell to 85% in the case of social functions. The corresponding figures for those on the

street are 85% to 76.25%. In contrast in Varanasi 100% of the respondents attended both religious and social functions. 85% of those living in rehabilitation homes of Vrindavan attended marriage ceremonies, but only 58.75% went near the bridal couple. The corresponding figures for those in boarding houses are 12.5% only attended marriage ceremonies, but not one went near the bridal couple. In Varanasi of the 85.71% of respondents in rehabilitation homes who attended marriage ceremonies not one went near the bridal couple. Of the 96.43% of respondents on the streets who attended marriage ceremonies, only 11.35% went near the bridal couple. 38.75%, 100% and 86.25% in all the three sections of Vrindavan were not allowed to enter the marriage hall. The corresponding figures for Varanasi are 85.71%, 100% and 92.86% in all three sections.³

Younger widows opined they were blamed for the death of their husband. Mala Bhandari in his study from Vrindavan and Varanasi observed that 3.75% of widows from rehabilitation homes, 1.25% from boarding houses and 2.5% of widows from the streets were blamed by their in-laws. The relatives blamed them in 7.14%, 3.57% in other two sectors of Varanasi. However 14.29% of the widows from Varanasi said that they were blamed by their parents itself.³

Despite the fact the women had been left to fend for themselves, there was no change in their children behaviour after the death of their husband. Studies from Vrindavan and Varanasi found that 50% in boarding homes and 40% on the streets in Vrindavan stated that their children had not turned negative towards them. Widows in Varanasi who had suffered negative behavior from their children were 17.86%, 10.71% and 28.57% in all three sections.³

According to a study from Vrindavan and Varanasi found that 26.25% in boarding homes and 6.25% on the streets in Vrindavan stated that the reason was not able to check their activities without the male member. About 17.86% of the widows in rehabilitation home in Varanasi who had suffered negative behavior from their children attributed it to bad company of their children. 3.57% of the widows in boarding home said that the reason of change in their children behaviour was without the male member they were unable to check their activities.³ According to Chen et al in his study among elders in Beijing found that the children had generally positive contribution to the well-being of older parents.⁵

In the current study it was found that all the widows in the study said that felt insecure when last rites were performed. In in-depth interview also it was found that overall, the widows irrespective of the age felt shocked and angered about the last rites but they felt that it was necessary as it is ongoing in a society. According to a study from Vrindavan and Varanasi found that most of the respondents interviewed were particular on their last rites being conducted in a befitting manner. About 76.25% of those in rehabilitation homes were confident that the last rites were conducted properly. In contrast, 97.55% of those in boarding houses and 92.55% of those on the streets are faced with a sense of insecurity. In Varanasi almost all the respondents interviewed were not sure whether their last rites were conducted properly.³

Majority of widows had no savings left by their husband. Studies from Vrindavan and Varanasi found that 66.25% and 73.75% of those in rehabilitation homes and boarding houses had

been left with some savings by their late husbands. In sharp contrast, 73.75% of those on the streets had no savings at all. In Varanasi the figures were 85.71%, 100% and 100% in all three sections had no savings left for them by their spouses.³

Majority of them had no bank account. That means the widows have not made an attempt to provide some security for themselves. This indicates a level of enterprise that can be utilized for empowering them further by introducing the banking concept to the widows. A Study from Vrindavan and Varanasi found that 66.25% and 73.75 % of those residing in rehabilitation homes and in boarding houses of Vrindavan had bank account. The corresponding figures for Varanasi were 35.71% and 60.71%. On the other hand 73.75% of those on the streets had no bank accounts. But in Varanasi only 14.28% were without bank accounts. Also it should be noted that while only 33.75% of the women in the rehabilitation homes of Vrindavan had no bank accounts, the corresponding figure for Varanasi are 64.29%.³ It was found that all the widows had a ration card. But none of them said that they receive old age pension. Among the respondents in rehabilitation homes of Vrindavan, 62.5% were holding ration cards. Again in boarding houses of Vrindavan 81.25% held ration cards. In Varanasi of the respondents in boarding houses, 50% were holding ration card.³ According to a case study done in Delhi 48.24% of the widows were knowledgeable about Sharia Laws that provided them the right to inherit parent's and husband's property. But in reality women did not claim share from such property.⁵

In-depth interview it was observed that overall, there was a difference between the older and younger widows as majority of the older widows opined that getting rice for food itself was difficult, but for the younger widows educating their children and to meet other expenses was difficult. According to a study from Vrindavan and Varanasi found that 50%, 31.25% of the widows in rehabilitation homes and boarding homes felt that their children marriage was most difficult to meet. About 23.75% of the widows in the streets said that food itself was difficult to manage. The most difficult expense for the widows of Varanasi was their children marriage in 57.14%, 46.43% and 60.17% in three sectors respectively.⁵

In in-depth interview, it was found that overall all the widows perceived that the government did not do anything specific for the widows. Except for a few respondents, others did not get Rs. 10,000/-. Two of the respondents opined that they did not get widow pension also in spite of the submission of the application long ago.

In in-depth interview it was observed that there were differences in the expectations from the government towards the welfare of widows. Widows who had attained widowhood after 50 years opined that they expected the government to supply rice. But younger emphasized that the government should give them some loan for their survival. Older widows seemed to worry over their next meal. These responses are an eye opener as it is need based. But they should also think in terms of larger issues, like advocating a change in society's attitude towards widows. Certainly an attempt will have to be made to stop them from being mere beneficiaries. Efforts will have to be made to make them independent and work for the dignity of a decent

living and existence. The community based study from Vrindavan and Varanasi found that 58.75% of those in rehabilitation homes in Vrindavan felt that social mindset should change. In sharp contrast 95% of those in boarding homes and 65% of those on the streets felt that eligibility of widows for pension was of paramount importance. For them money was urgent and immediate need, since they were always leading a hand to mouth rehabilitation homes would like jobs to made available to them. But 93.75% of those in boarding homes and 81.25% of those on the streets emphasized on the need for pension benefits.³

VI. CONCLUSION

The widows are socially, economically and culturally deprived. As per the societal norms they are against widow's remarriage. They need more help from the government to support their living

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I place my deep sense of gratitude to the president and other executive committee members of IAPSM for having chosen me to for the epidemiology research grant project. I express my heart-felt thanks to my guide Dr. S. B. Rotti, Professor- cum- field Epidemiologist for having inspired and helped me in every aspect of this work.

REFERENCES

- [1] Pushpanjali Swain, Socio Demographic and Health Profile of Widows in India, in NFHS -2, International Institute for Population Sciences, Bombay: 2004.
- [2] Meera Khanna. The Status of Widows in South Asia. Women's United Nations Report Network (WUNRN). 2005: 1-6.
- [3] Mala Bhandari. Status of Widows of Vrindavan and Varanasi (A Comparative Study). Guild of Science supported by National Commission of Women. http://griefandrenewal.com/widows_study.htm.
- [4] Wilcox, Sara, Evenson, Kelly R, Aragaki, Aaron, Wassertheil Smoller, Sylvia, Mouton, Charles P, Loevinger, Barbara Lee. **The effects of widowhood on physical and mental health, health behaviors, and health outcomes, The Women's Health Initiative.** Health Psychology. 2003; 5: 513-522.
- [5] Chen, Silverstein M. Intergenerational social support and the psychological well-being of older parents in China. Research on Aging 2000; 1: 43-65.

AUTHORS

First Author – Dr DEVI KITTU, Associate Professor, Melmaruvathur Adhi Parasakthi Institute of Medical Sciences and Research,, e-mail ID:devi.kittu@rediffmail.com
Second Author – Dr Rotti S. B, Professor (Retired), e-mail ID: rottisb2000@yahoo.co.in

Correspondence Author – Dr DEVI KITTU, e-mail ID:devi.kittu@rediffmail.com, Contact no: 09443481242.

