

# THE SILENT MOURNING TRANSFORMED TO PRACTICAL SMILES



Dr. Dipti Mayee Sahoo

## INTRODUCTION

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 they are responsible for the care and support of their children. Hindu women's legal right to inherit property has been restricted from the earliest times in Indian culture. In the ancient text Manusmriti, Manu writes: "Her father protects her in childhood, her husband protects her in youth and her sons protect her in old age; a woman is never fit for independence." However, women were not always excluded from inheriting movable or immovable property from ancestral and marital families. But their proportion of share in the property was far less than that of their male counterparts. Throughout history, restrictions on Hindu women's property rights have undergone change, and current laws governing these rights are more liberal than those of ancient Hindu society. Patriarchal Hindu society provided women with property known as stridhan (literally, women's property or fortune), and it mainly came from marriage gifts (clothes, jewelry, and in some rare cases, landed properties). However, women were denied property rights to the ancestral or marital landed property, and their right over succession of the landed family property was limited.

With the emergence of different schools of Hindu law, the concept of stridhan started expanding its literal and legal meaning, granting women more rights to certain forms of property. Later, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries witnessed the passage of several pieces of legislation that were intended to remove more of the barriers to full and equal property rights for Hindu women. Most recently, sexual discrimination in Hindu succession rules was mostly discontinued by the recent Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act (2005). 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. **Apart from these traditional practices related to 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. She is socially marginalized and culturally ostracized in societies where life revolves around the male.** Thus, the various issues relating to widow's property rights and other basic rights need to be understood and redressed as soon as possible for promoting

sustainable enrichment of our society.

Admittedly, it was an aberration and an isolated case. But the other socio-cultural traditions governing widowhood continue to prevail in varying degrees, particularly in the states of West Bengal, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Bihar. Apart from these traditional practices related to 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. 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. 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 . **Remarriage, legalised by law, continues to be frowned upon, especially if the widow has children.** If the widow is young, in some castes, levirate marriage is practiced under which the widow is married to the brother of the dead husband. Such a remarriage may be forced upon her because of economic reasons . Young

widows may have to face the additional humiliation of being sexually exploited and trafficked. Even the widows in the ostensibly holy places of Vrindavan and Varanasi do not escape sexual exploitation. Studies have revealed that the 'Sevadasi' system in these towns serves as a cloak for their sexual exploitation.

**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. 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. Studies also reveal that female headed households are generally poorer than male headed households . **The laws of inheritance, which entitle a widow to inherit her husband's property, too do not alleviate the economic miseries of a widow.** First, she

may inherit on paper, but fail to secure de facto control of property/ inheritance. Her inheritance, in most cases passes into the hands of some male members. This may be achieved merely by denying the marriage or through levirate, as mentioned earlier or by the simple expedient of controlling the income from the property. Such passing of control into other hands is most common when a widow has no children (in which case a male relative takes over) or when she has grown up son/sons who take charge of the property. Thus, she continues to be the recipient of dole-outs given by the male family members at their whim and fancy. 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 them 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. Sense of insecurity, both social and financial, causes severe mental stress which results in a number of health related problems.**

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. Widowhood coupled with economic vulnerability affects the well being of the children of widows also. Thus, **lack of finance may impel the widow to withdraw her children from school and even send them out**

**to work.** They also suffer from ill health and malnutrition because of lack of means to access appropriate health care. Children of HIV positive widows bear a double brunt- of disease and poverty. It may also be asserted that **widows are not a homogeneous group and may be classified into various categories** such as

- **elderly widows,**
- **war widows,**
- **HIV/AIDS widows, and**
- **widows surviving farmer suicides and**
- **even on the basis of age groups, castes, and religion.**

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. Although **the issue of inheritance, housing and access to resources cuts across boundaries of religion, caste and class, it is primarily among the upper and middle classes, that the problem becomes more severe.** Upper caste widows face restriction on employment as well as mobility due to socio-cultural and religious reasons.

#### PROPERTY RIGHTS

The practices of widowhood and customs all operate to her disadvantage. The **widows face lots of discrimination as**, if not more, in matters of **inheritance of house and agricultural land and** even going to the extent of **deprivation of custody of her male child.**

The worst treatment of widows is observed in Hinduism which does not even confer an independent identity on the widow. All this, notwithstanding, the issues and concerns of widows have been sidelined at both the International and National levels. For instance, The Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1979) which has come to be known as the Women's Bill of Rights, and aims at achievement of substantive as against merely formal equality makes no direct reference to the problems of widows. The Beijing Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995 identifies 12 critical areas of concern, yet widows remain an uncounted and excluded category. Widows do find mention at the National level and a few laws and schemes have been floated for their benefit.

Way back in the **pre-independence period, sati was banned by a law in 1829** and the **remarriage of widows was permitted** by the Widow Remarriage Act enacted in 1856. **Post-independence, the Hindu Succession Act, 1956 permitted a widow to inherit an equal share** (along with other heirs) of her husband's property. However, Section 24 of the said Act did not entitle the widow of a predeceased son, or of a brother to inherit the intestate's property as the widow, if on the date of succession she has remarried. This provision was deleted by the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005, which makes provision for the above mentioned categories of widows to inherit even if they have remarried.

This Amendment makes her, (the Widow), the Class I legal heir and if there are no

other Class I legal heirs, she will be the absolute owner of the entire estate of her husband. Apart from this, **Section 19 of The Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act, 1956 provides for maintenance of widowed daughter-in-law. The Domestic Violence Act 2005 equally pays attention to the concerns of widows.** It includes widows within the definition of domestic relationships along with other women members of the family (Section 2(f)). The widow also has a right of residence and cannot be thrown out of the shared household except through procedure established by law (Section 17). She can get a residence order under Section 19 if she apprehends being thrown out of the house or in cases where she has been thrown out and wants to return to her house (Section 19).

**The National Policy for the Empowerment of Women 2001 also makes provision for protection and empowerment of vulnerable sections of women including widows and elderly.** Apart from these legal provisions, both the **Central government** as well as majority of the State governments has instituted certain schemes for widows. **At the state level**, schemes like **Financial Assistance to Widows** and Destitute Women have been provided for. Under this scheme, financial assistance will be provided to women who are below the age of 60 years and have no means of subsistence or have been deprived of husband's support due to any reason. The unmarried women above the age of 30 years living a life of destitution are also eligible to get the benefit of this scheme. Another state sponsored scheme is Ashirwad to Scheduled Caste/Christian Girls and Daughters of Widows at the time of their



Marriage. Under this scheme the girls belonging to Scheduled Caste will be provided financial assistance on the occasion of their marriages.

Among the Centrally sponsored schemes foremost is the National Old Age Pension Scheme. Under this scheme, the benefit will be given to the following:-

- (1) Disabled persons
- (2) Issueless persons
- (3) Widows and Destitute Women.

Persons of 65 years and above having little or no source of income will be given old age pension of two hundred rupees per month over and above the amount paid under the state level old age pension scheme. The Centre under another scheme also provides for a Grant of five lakh rupees for purchase of plot/house for widows of martyrs, and 75 percent to 100 percent disabled soldiers during different operations from the year 1999 onwards.

The entire subjugation is perpetuated through maintenance and strengthening of gender role stereotypes, a key manifestation of patriarchy. It is these stereotyped notions of male and female, masculinity and femininity, which dictate that the husband is the God, the centre of a woman's universe and in his absence, she is nothing. During his lifetime, all decisions regarding her and their children are taken by the husband thus conferring an infantile status on the woman. After his death, the entire patriarchal structure dictates her inability to take decisions.

**Uma Chakravarti has also linked patriarchy with the social exclusion of widows, using the term „Brahmanical patriarchy“ as it is primarily the upper castes which impose social norms and taboos on the**

**widows. It is these factors which equally govern the attitude of the state and legal apparatus in their treatment of widows, adopting a welfarist rather than an empowerment approach. Patriarchy and Social Construction of Gender, as theories to explain the status of widows, also need to be underlined by theories of violence and power.**

Although scholars have put forth a number of theories to explain violence, the **Social Learning theory** is particularly relevant for the present study. Social Learning Theory proposes that individuals learn and imitate through direct experience by observing others' behavior. "If one observes violent behavior, one is more likely to imitate it. If there are no negative consequences (e.g. victim accepts the violence, with submission), then the behavior will likely continue. Often violence is transmitted from generation to generation in cyclical manner."

This violence is used as a means to „control women“. The overall subordination of widows must also be seen in the context of power relations and control over resources. Duluth Domestic Abuse Intervention Project has developed a **“Power and Control Wheel”**. This power and control wheel highlights the dynamics of power by the perpetrator and the various methods to exert this power such as, coercion and threats; intimidation; emotional abuse; isolation; minimizing, denying, and blaming; using children; economic abuse; and male privilege. These are also the means by which widows are kept in subordination

**The Resource Theory put forward by William Goode (1971) also links violence and**

power relationships. The theory views resources such as education and income as crucial for exercising power. Further, it links their non-availability with violence in order to attain power. In the context of widows, non-availability of resources not only deprives the widows of power, but enables those with resources to exercise power upon them. Lack of resources not only deprive widows of power but also makes them vulnerable to violence which may be exercised in many forms.

**Connell** has highlighted culture as an aspect of **Symbolic Relations in his Gender and Power Model**. He opines that “Cultural systems bear particular social interests, and grow out of historically specific ways of life. This point applies to gender meanings. Whenever we speak of a woman” or a man“, we call into play a tremendous system of understandings, implications, overtones and allusions that have accumulated through our cultural history.” Thus culture assumes significance in understanding power relationships. Thus patriarchy, gender relations, power, control, resources, learned behavior and culture all impinge upon the status of widows in any given society.

**The theoretical framework underpinning the present study includes a combination of all these theories because first women have been socialized into particular gender roles where males are superior and central.** The patriarchal norms confer low and subordinated status to women and widows are the worst affected because the absence of a husband (male) in their life accords a subordinated position in the society as well as within the family. **Patriarchy also determines**

**male control over the lives of women. In the case of widows such control may be exercised by other males in the family.**

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

It is contemplated that a review of literature should focus on the issues that have been already addressed in the empirical as well as theoretical literature focusing on the phenomenon under investigation pretending to the causes, the extent, the nature as well as the determinants. At the same time it should also take stock of the perspectives approaches and orientations on the one hand and methods, tools and techniques on the other, employed in the study and the analysis of the factors and issues stated above.

**A good review of literature should aim at the thematic classification of the studies focusing on diverse issues pertaining to the phenomenon under investigation and analyze the major findings that could be taken as extending the limits of our knowledge about the phenomenon instead of ending up as a mere survey of literature published on the in subject. It is precisely owing to these reasons an attempt is made in this chapter to analytically a focus on relevant literature pertaining to problems of scheduled castes and widows, provisions of Indian constitution, Government policies to develop the social status of widows and the repercussions of widowhood have been one of the important areas of concern and focus of a number of scholars in their books and articles.**

**In the present context, some studies having direct relevance to the issue of widows and their status as a whole, be it in family, community and society as a whole.**

**Hanumantha Rayappa and Umarani** (1987) had conducted a study on the „Incidence of Widowhood in Karnataka“ with the following objectives.

(1) To examine the present trends and differentials in the incidence of widowhood from 1921 onwards and

2) the causes and consequences of widowhood. Trends were mostly obtained from census data and the differentials were taken from survey data.

The study included 182 sample widows drawn at random from Lingayats, Vokkaligas, Brahmins, Schedule Caste, Kuruba, Kujan, Scheduled tribes, other castes and other religions. They estimated that the mean age at widowhood for those got widowed by the age of 45, ranged from 30 years in the decade 1901-11 to 35 years for the decade 1961-71.

In their paper entitled “Widows and Health in Rural North India” published in „Economic & Political Weekly“, **Chen and Dreze** (1992) reported that the labour force participation rates of widows in India tend to be a little higher than those of married women of the same age. Because widows tend to be concentrated in 24 the older age groups, their average labour force participation rate is lower than that of married women. When widows do participate in salaried work, it is mainly in the form of part-time, low paid employment in institutions such as village balwadis. The extent of remunerative self-employment among widows living in households without an adult male turns out to be strikingly restricted. **This finding, which confirms the results of an earlier study of North Indian widows (Dreze,**

**1990), illustrates the employment restrictions that result from the gender division of labour and related social norms as well as from the disadvantages that widows face as participants in the rural economy.**

**Chakravarti** (1998) in their paper entitled “Gender, Caste and Labour: The Ideological and Material Structure of Widowhood”, attempted to explore the relationship between gender, caste and labour, in the context of widowhood. **The study analyzed widowhood among the upper castes, an issue that has dominated the consciousness of the society for over a century. Patriarchal practices among the different castes, though dissimilar are part of a larger structure of caste, production and reproduction.** Thus, traditional 25 patriarchal practices could be very distinctive for different castes making for a hierarchy of cultures and a system of production in which the low castes labour reproduce labour whereas the high castes do not labour and reproduce only specialists: ritual specifications which needs to perform specific types of non-manual work.

**Martha A. Chen** (1998) in her introduction written to the edited book entitled “Widows in India: Social Neglect and Public Action” stated that the well-being of widows is not just a question of economic security, but also one of dignity, self-respect and participation in society. Many widows in his sample suffered from different forms of social isolation, psychological abuse or emotional distress. **In the study , it was found that the social marginalization of widows frequently took one or more of the following forms:**

1. **Rumours and accusation:** Widows are often accused of being “responsible” for the death of their husband, regarded as sexually threatening, and generally considered as inauspicious.

2. **Enforced dress and behaviour codes:** Many widows are under strong pressure to observe restrictive codes of dress, appearance and behaviour. Some of the traditional restrictions (e.g. Shaving of head) have become quite rare, even among the upper castes, but others (e.g. Not wearing the symbols of marriage) remain widespread.

3. **Social ostracism:** A widow is often excluded from the religious and social life of the community, due to her perceived inauspiciousness.

4. **Physical violence:** Violence against widows primarily takes the form of sexual harassment (young widows being considered as sexually vulnerable and/or promiscuous) or 26 property-related violence (many widows being seen as unwanted claimants on ancestral property).

**Gulati and Gulati (1998)** studies on the social security pensions which are basically intended to provide income support to persons adversely affected by events like retrenchment, sickness, physical disability, old and/ or widowhood. The analysis of widows’ statistics shows that the proportion of the aged widows and elderly in the state’s population will go up from the present 7.55% to 10.2% in 2010. **Hence there is need for increase in the social security schemes for the widows and elderly people.**

**Misra and Thukral (1998)** writes on “Widows and Property Rights: A Study of Two

Villages in Bihar” which is based on study conducted to know about the property rights of the widows in two villages of Bihar, namely Aropur and Hariharpur of Saraiya block in Muzzaffarpur district. The authors surveyed 16 widows belonging to Hindu religion, but belonging to different castes and communities, their families and the land and revenue officials at the block level. **The study revealed that even though these widows have right to their husband’s land and property, they do not exercise complete ownership rights on the same.**

**Nandwana and Nandwana (1998)** in their paper entitled “Land Rights of Widows in Rajasthan”, focused on the land rights of widows in two villages: Kavita and Kadiyan, both of Badgaon block of Udaipur district in Rajasthan. The study was conducted on 57 widows living in these villages. **The study highlighted the legal provisions pertaining to widows as per Hindu inheritance law and compared them with the rights which the widows were able to exercise in reality.** As such the study explored a number of issues such as the Hindu Law of Succession; Statutory Land Rights in Rajasthan; customary land rights in Rajasthan; why widows are unable to exercise their land rights and recommendations to protect women’s land rights.

In her study on the “Hindu widows: A Study of Deprivation” in Dharwad District (Karnataka State), **Patil (2000) has analyzed their social, economic, cultural and psychological deprivation.** The primary data was collected from 300 sample widows -150 rural and 150 urban - using the interview



method, Chi-square test, student T test and simple descriptive percentages were used to analyze the data. The author found in his study that the mean age at widowhood of rural widows was 38.11 years and of urban widows was 41.50 years. The mean duration of widowed life for rural widows was higher (14.20 years) than that of the urban widows (12.65 years).

**Malathi (2001)** has published her paper entitled "Empowerment of Widows". It is based on study conducted on Socio-Economic Status of Hindu Naidu widows in Walajapet Taluk, Vellore District, Tamil Nadu- A Three Generation Study. There were 340 widows in her sample frame which comprised of 100 young, 114 middle and 126 old generation widows. Descriptive percentage and other statistical methods were used to analyze the data. The study reports that the mean period of widowhood of the respondents of young widows was 13.5 years, a middle-aged widow was 14.7 years and the old generation was 10.7 years. **She also found that the old generation widows had a long married life and hence had a shorter duration of widowhood. Conversely, the young and middle-aged widows have a short span of married life, hence they have a longer period of widowhood.**

**Martha Alter Chen (2000)** in her book **Perpetual Mourning: Widowhood in Rural India** observes that according to the orthodox Hindu model a woman is by nature wild, sexual and dangerous and this sexuality has to be curbed by the control of the male. Thus a wife may be controlled by her husband, but a widow, due to absence of male control becomes dangerous. A perceived threat by a widow's unbridled

sexuality is also the reason for the focus on both remarriage and levirate system.

**Sekhar Bandyopadhyay(2008)** in the article „Caste, Widow-Remarriage, and the Reform of Popular Culture in Colonial Bengal“ highlights the ways in which social reforms in Bengal in the nineteenth century affected the gender relations and the condition of women, particularly widows. The author **also highlights how different castes perceived widow remarriage.** Specific mention is made of control of women's sexuality and how social reformers sought to achieve this under the cloak of social reforms. The author quotes extensively from Vidyasagar in support of this contention.

#### **Widow Headed Households**

Another, major area taken up by scholars in studies on widows is that of households headed by widows. There is increasing number of female headed households in India and one of the many causes traced for this increase is the death of the male bread winner.

**Maithreyi Krishna Raj and Jyoti Ranadive (1982)** in their study „The Rural Female Heads of Households: Hidden from View“ apart from concluding that one of the causes of increasing number of female headed households is the death of the male bread winner have also linked this with religion, observing that incidence of female headed households is higher among Christians than among the Hindus because of traditional orthodoxy amongst Hindus.

A study conducted by **Institute of Social Studies Trust(1985)** on **India's Female Headed Households** also offers a similar conclusion and further reveals that a majority of

female headed households suffer greater economic disadvantage than male headed households as most of the development programmes have not reached them at all and even awareness of such schemes is missing.

Sara Wilcox, (2003) writes on "The Effects of Widowhood on Physical and Mental Health, Health Behaviors, 30 and Health Outcomes: The Women's Health Initiative" in „Health Psychology“. This study examined whether widowhood was associated with physical and mental health, health behaviors, and health outcomes using a cross-sectional (N= 72,247) and prospective (N = 55,724) design in women aged 50–79 years participating in the Women's Health Initiative observational study (85.4% White). At baseline, married women reported better physical and mental health and generally better health behaviors than widowed women. Whereas women who remained married over the 3-year period showed stability in mental health, recent widows experienced marked impairments and longer term widows showed stability or slight improvements. Both groups of widows reported more unintentional weight loss over the 3-year period. Changes in physical health and health behaviors were inconsistent, with generally small effect sizes. Findings underscore the resilience of older women and their capacity to reestablish connections, but point to the need for services that strengthen social support among women who have difficulty during this transition.

Trivedi, (2009) published an article entitled "Psychological Aspects of Widowhood and Divorce" in „Mens Sana Monograph“. Despite advances in standard of living of the

population, the condition of widows and divorced women remains deplorable in society. The situation is worse in developing nations with their unique social, cultural and economic milieu, which at times ignores the basic human rights of this vulnerable section of society. A gap exists in life expectancies of men and women in both developing and developed nations. This, coupled with greater remarriage rates in men, ensures that the number of widows continues to exceed that of widowers. Moreover, with women becoming more educated, economically independent and aware of their rights, divorce rates are increasing along with associated psychological ramifications. The fact that widowed/divorced women suffer from varying psychological stressors is often ignored. It has been concluded in various studies that such stressors could be harbingers of psychiatric illnesses (e.g., depression, anxiety, substance dependence), and hence should be taken into account by treating physicians, social workers and others who come to the aid of such women. A change in mindset of the society is required before these women get their rightful place, for which a strong will is needed in the minds of the people, and in lawgoverning bodies. Madiwalappa (2011) conducted a research study entitled "Employment and Widows: Their Changing Role and Status in Urban Setting". Totally 375 employed widows and 125 unemployed widows.

Manju Mehta, (2006) writes on "Effect of Widowhood on Repression – Sensitisation Tendency" in „Journal of Indian academy of Applied Psychology“. The present study was undertaken to see the effect of widowhood on

repression - sensitization tendency taking four groups of women i.e. non working widows, working widows, non working married and working married women, who are middle aged and residing in urban setting. The study was conducted on 70 widows (35 non working and 35 working) and 90 married women (45 non working and 45 working) aged between 35 to 50 years using R-S scale by Mehta and Koradia was used to assess the repression - sensitisation tendency. Data was analyzed using „t“ Test . The findings reveal that widows were found to be having significantly higher level of sensitization tendency in comparison to married women irrespective of non working/ working status of theirs or of married women. .

According to Emmanuel Janagan Johnson and Shyamala (2012) as stated in their paper entitled “Widow Remarriage: A New Dimension of Social Change in India” published in „International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences“, a good marriage does not simply happen. Widow Remarriage is a big question and a task for the women in India. In this study the author highlights the problems faced by the widows, the impact of widow remarriage and its consequences in the society and the changes it brought as a new dimension of social change in India. The finding evidently shows that social stigma on widows is not in practice in India at present. This is a welcoming and good sign for the growth of the country. Widows are permitted to take up jobs, attend functions and ceremonies. The level of suppression of widow in the name of widowhood is gradually vanishing.

**Katia Sarla Mohindra,** (2012) writes

on “Debt, Shame and Survival: Becoming and Living as Widows in Rural Kerala, India” in „BMC International Health and Humanity“. **The health and well-being of widows in India is an important but neglected issue of public health and women’s rights.** The authors investigated the lives of Indian women as they become widows, focusing on the causes of their husband’s mortality and the ensuing consequences of these causes on their own lives and identify the opportunities and challenges that widows face in living healthy and fulfilling lives. Data were collected in a Gram Panchayat (lowest level territorial decentralised unit) in the south Indian state of Kerala. Interviews were undertaken with key informants in order to gain an understanding of local constructions of „widowhood“ and the welfare and social opportunities for widows. Then we conducted semistructured interviews with widows in the community on issues related to health and vulnerability, enabled to hear perspectives from widows. Data were analyzed for thematic content and emerging patterns. The authors synthesized our findings with theoretical understandings of vulnerability.

#### **INTERPRETATION OF GAPS AND NEEDS OF THE WIDOWS**

There are about 33 million widows in India, representing 8 per cent of the total female population (Census of India 1991). The proportion of widows in the female population rises sharply with age, reaching over 60 per cent among women aged sixty and above. Despite the concentration of widows in older age groups, there are still a large number of widows below fifty years of age. In spite of these numbers,

relatively little is known about the actual living conditions of widows in India or what widows need and want.

**What Widows Needs** - Although the status of widows varies a great deal across different regions, social groups and age groups, some basic factors account for the disadvantages and insecurity faced by many Indian widows (Dreze 1990; Chen and Dreze 1995d). In the discussion that follows, to illustrate these factors, I summarize the major findings of my recent field study of widows in seven states of India: West Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Kerala. This study covered all ever-widowed women (a total of 562) in fourteen villages, two in each state (Chen forthcoming).

**Patrilocality:** Patrilocality in the narrow sense refers to the norm, prevalent in most Hindu communities of India, according to which a woman has to leave her parental home at the time of marriage to join her husband in his home. In a broader sense, especially in North India where marriage rules dictate marriage outside the village, patrilocality can also be understood to refer to the drastic alienation from her parental family experienced by a married woman after her 'transfer' to her husband's family. The system of patrilocal residence also plays a crucial part in the deprivation of widows. In North India, in particular, widows are expected to remain in their husband's village, and most of them do so. However, they are unlikely to receive much support from their in-laws. In effect, most North Indian widows are denied both the freedom to leave their husband's village, and the support they need to live there happily (Dreze and Sen

1995:174). In specific, we can see that nearly 75 per cent of the widows lived in their husband's village at the time of his death. Of these widows, an overwhelming majority (88 per cent) remained in their deceased husband's village after his death. In many cases, widows actually continue to live in their deceased husband's house. However, outside of leviratic unions (which are practised only in certain communities), widows are unlikely to share a common hearth with their husband's relatives.

**Patrilineal inheritance:** In rural India, even today, most social groups follow customary norms rather than modern statutory law. In regard to property, there is a widespread tradition of joint patrilineal ownership under which widows are entitled to use rights (if they have no adult sons) or maintenance rights (if they have adult sons) over their husband's share of ancestral land.

The widows whose husbands owned land, only half (51 per cent) reported that they exercise use rights over a share of their husband's land. Moreover, many of these widows reported that their use rights are violated in practice. When a widow tries to manage the land on her own, without adult sons, her in-laws often insist on sharecropping or managing her land themselves, or simply attempt to deprive her of her rightful share of the land. In their attempt to gain control of her land, in-laws—or other rival claimants—may go so far as forcing a widow to leave the village or even, in extreme cases, arranging her murder. Once her sons (if any) grow up, a widow may have to forfeit her use rights to her husband's land in exchange for a right to maintenance by one or more of her sons.



Even maintenance rights, as noted below, are often uncertain.

**Social isolation:** The well-being of widows is not just a question of economic security, but also one of dignity, self-respect and participation in society. Many widows suffer from different forms of social isolation, psychological abuse or emotional distress arising from the perceived threats to the social order and to ancestral property associated with widows. The social marginalization of widows frequently takes one or more of the following forms: rumours and accusations; restrictive codes of dress, diet and demeanour; social ostracism from the religious and social life of the community; physical harassment and even violence. Of course, not all widows face these various sources of disadvantage and insecurity. Some widows live with their sons (and their families) and enjoy their respect and love. Other widows are happily integrated in the home of their married daughter, brother, parents or in-laws. But most widows must manage on their own (those who do live independently) or earn their keep (those who live as dependents). And some widows, particularly young widows, are vulnerable to mistreatment. What then are the expressed needs ought to be analysed practically.

Various participatory training methods needs to be used to facilitate communication despite the barrier of language (nine languages were represented), including games, exercises and skits. There should be workshops covering a range of issues and concerns raised by the participants, including: changes in women's identity and status with widowhood; images of

good and bad women; taboos regarding the behaviour of widows; options, constraints and choices regarding remarriage, living arrangements and sources of support; struggles by widows to secure their property rights; other actions taken by widows to assert their individual or collective rights; demands of the widows on society and on government. The workshops needs **to bring out what the experience of widowhood is for an Indian woman today**, despite their widely differing social and regional backgrounds.

First, a woman who loses her husband has to adjust the entire basis of her life and work: who she lives with, how she earns her livelihood, her access to her husband's property etc.

Second, the negotiations involved in these adjustments are typically much easier if she has adult sons or supportive parents and brothers.

Third, most widows received very little support from their in-laws. In fact, relations with in-laws are often quite tense.

Finally, the primary concerns should be to make the widows who participated in this workshop ;

having a house or land in their own name;  
a secure job, source of livelihood, or maintenance;

education for their children;

and last but not least, a positive social image.

More specifically, the demands put forward for the widows should be:

**Housing-**, including automatic transfer of the conjugal house to the widow's name upon the death of her husband, or allotment of a house

site and housing by the government;

**Land:** including automatic transfer of land (and other property) to the widow's name upon the death of her husband;

**Employment:** including automatic transfer of the husband's job to the widow (or her son) or training, credit and other services for self-employment;

**Children's education: including** scholarships; stipends to cover the costs of books, uniforms and transport; and boarding facilities. And, for those widows who cannot secure property rights or pursue gainful employment, the widows demanded:

**Social Security,** pensions or other forms of social security from the government.

## CONCLUSION

Most fundamentally, the widows demanded dignity and respect, a positive social image and identity. This too is not an unreasonable demand, but it relates to the image and identity of women in general, and not only widows, in Indian society. This demand cannot be met through government legislation or intervention. The dignity, respect and positive social identity demanded by widows must be granted to them by the by Indian society at large for promoting sustainable development .Hence, there lies an urgent need to create more opportunities for widows to come together and redefine their image as women with dignity and rights. And there is a need to create more opportunities for the society as a whole, as well as policy-makers, to listen to widows and hear their demands. Two **salient findings of the study are: first, becoming a widow can be viewed** as a type of shock" that operates

similarly to other **economic shocks" or health shocks"** in poor countries except that the burden falls disproportionately on women. **Second, widowhood is not a static phenomenon**, but rather can be viewed as a multi-phased process with different public health implications at each stage. More research on widows in India and other countries will help to both elucidate the challenges faced by widows and encourage potential solutions. The framework developed in this paper could be used to guide future research on widows.

## Bibliography

- Chen, Martha A. (ed.) (forthcoming), Widows in India: Social Neglect and Public Action, New Delhi: Sage.
- Chen, Martha A. and Jean Dreze (1995a), 'Widows and Weil-Being in Rural North India', in M. Das Gupta,
- T. N. Krishnan and L. Chen (eds.), Women's Health in India, New Delhi: Oxford University Press. (1995&), 'Recent Research on Widows in India: Workshop and Conference Report', Economic and Political Weekly 30/39, 30 September, 2435-50.
- Cohen, Lawrence (forthcoming), No Aging in India: Alzheimer's, Bad Families, and Other Modern Things, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Dreze, Jean (1990), 'Widows in Rural India', Discussion Paper No. 26,

Development Economics Research Programme, London School of Economics.

- Dreze, Jean and Amartya Sen (1995), India: Economic Development and Social Opportunity, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Dreze, Jean and P. V. Srinivasan (forthcoming), 'Widowhood and Poverty in Rural India: Some Inferences from

Household Survey Data', in Chen (forthcoming).

- Mari Bhat, P. N. (forthcoming), 'Widows and Widowhood Mortality in India', in Chen (forthcoming).
- Oldenberg, Veena (1994), 'The Continuing Invention of the Sati Tradition', in John S. Hawley (ed.), Sati The Blessing and the Curse, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

