

Understanding Vulnerability, Coping Mechanisms and Resilience among Abandoned Elderly Widows of Pilgrim centres in India: A Life Course Approach

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Background of the study

Widowhood has always been considered as one of the most traumatic and distressing life transitions experienced by women especially in old age, and they suffer from lots of physical and psychological changes that occur during the widowhood transition phase in all age groups (Gupta and Sekher, 2017). Widows are socially ostracized as they have been economically dependent on others, throughout their lives and have faced discrimination and human rights violations. Widows across the globe share two common experiences—a loss of social status and reduced economic circumstances. Across countries, religion and ethnic group upon the demise of a husband, a widow is often left destitute (Nnodim and Isife, 2012).

The “invisible” group of women who are widowed and ‘dumped’ in Holi centers in India are facing social exclusion, victimization, deprivation and poverty. Different cultural contexts suggest that not only are widows ill-treated by their husbands' kin, but sons can also be equally uncaring: abandoning their widowed mother to a life of poverty and loneliness; dispossessing them of their homes through trickery; or allowing their own wives to use widowed mothers-in-law as unpaid and mistreated domestic servants. Evidence suggests that women, who become widowed, often experience higher levels of marginalization due to cultural and religious practices (e.g., ceremonies that symbolized passage into widowhood, prohibition of wearing jewellery and other adornments, and exclusion from wedding ceremonies) (Malik, 2013).

Objectives

The main objective of the paper was to understand different dynamics of vulnerabilities and risks faced by elderly widows abandoned in the religious cities of India. The paper also tried to look into the coping mechanisms and the level of resilience adopted by these abandoned elderly widows.

Methods and Materials

Data Source: The study is based on the primary data collected from the old age homes, shelter homes (run by government or private Organization or NGOs) which are giving shelter to these abandoned widows, after their families and friends have dumped them and also from those who are living on the streets, outside temples and Ghats (in absence of a place to live).

Study Area: The study was conducted in two pilgrim centres- Vrindavan and Varanasi in the state of Uttar Pradesh, India. This is where most of the widows, disowned by their families come to live after abandonment in the later stage of their life.

Sample Size: For this study, a total of 360 respondents were selected purposively depending on the time, availability and accessibility of the respondents.

Methodology : As it was intended to be an exploratory study, the methodology used was an investigative one using research tools such as questionnaire for interviews, Case Studies and Key Informant Interviews (KII). Univariate, Bivariate and Multivariate analysis has been used for the analysis. Some of the standard scales like BRIEF- COPE scale, LSNS-18 scale MHC-SF and CD-RISC 25 scale has been used to capture the Coping strategies , Social network , General wellbeing and Resilience among the abandoned elderly widows.

Ethical Issues: Since this study was based on primary data, so the research ethics was very important to address. An informed consent form had been formulated and prior consent was taken before starting the interview and the respondents were informed about the purpose of the study. The confidentiality of the information has been maintained. As requirement, before initiating the field work, clearance from IIPS Research Ethics Board was obtained.

Major Findings:

It is astonishing that even today, in Indian society, widows have to follow a lot of cultural practices and restriction as compared to widowers. Information regarding the cultural restrictions imposed upon these marginalized abandoned elderly widows was gathered and Figure 1. reveals the different types of cultural restrictions faced by them, majority of the elderly widows reported following these restrictions: food (98.6%), remarriage (98.1%), colours (97.2%), make up(93.3%), use of ornaments (86.4%), clothing(use of white cloths only)(80.8%), shaving off hair(37.2%) and mobility restrictions(14.4%). Abandoned Elderly widows in both the cities reported similar patterns of restriction followed by them at present. Approximately three fourth(76.1%) of the elderly widows continued following these cultural restrictions and practices even after facing abandonment This clearly states that these atrocious practices are deeply rooted in our society and these become a continuous behavioural pattern strongly imbibed among the old widows even after being isolated by their families and society. Breaking stereotypes related to widowhood status for women seems difficult, as these elderly women are still unwilling to free themselves from social discrimination even though they are facing isolation from their own family and community who once forced them to follow these restrictions and are currently now absent from their lives. The major reason could be that their strong religious beliefs and traditional orthodox outlook overpowers their ability to take right choices and lack of education and poverty continues engulfing them by social discrimination, exclusion and marginalization.

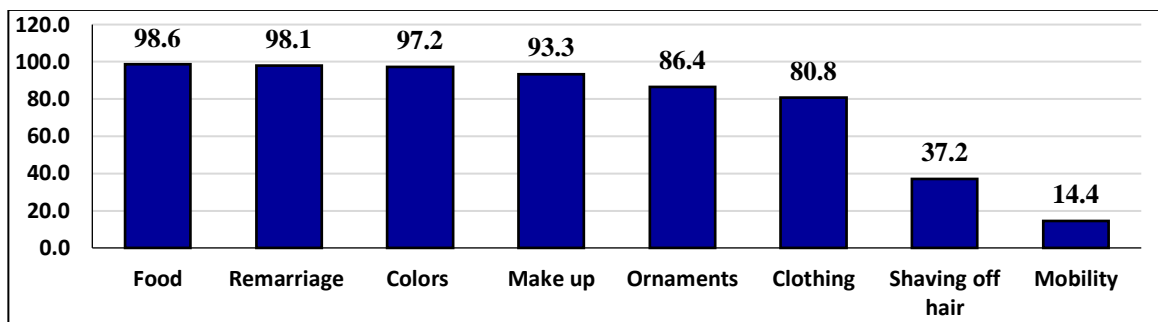


Figure 1. Percentage distribution of elderly abandoned widows facing cultural restrictions after widowhood

In the face of two major life changing events faced by these elderly women i.e. widowhood and abandonment, it is very evident that they are left isolated in their surrounding and the feeling of being left out can have repercussions on their social connectedness. Social isolation in general means lack of social interaction or connectedness with the networks around her i.e. family, friends or neighbours. It was important to understand the relationship of social isolation and the factors that might trigger it over the period of time spent in abandonment. LSNS-18 item scale was used to get a composite score of overall social networking/social connectedness. Higher scores indicate higher levels of social network and lower scores clearly shows the predicament of social isolation.

The result from Table 1. showing multiple linear regression analysis states that the older widows aged 70-79 years and 80+ years have 0.19 unit and 1.8 unit lesser scores on social network respectively as compared to those aged 60-69 years, keeping all the other factors constant, in the initial years of abandonment. But surprisingly, the social network scores were 1.42 times higher for the oldest widows (80+ years) in the long-drawn-out years of abandonment compared to those in 60-69 years. This could mean that with time they might become ready to mingle and connect with their surroundings easily overcoming their trauma showing resilient behaviour. Urban elderly widows reported 1.28 times and 0.21 times higher scores compared to rural elderly widows irrespective of the years spent in abandonment. Surprisingly, those elderly widows who were staying with in laws after their widowhood were showing relatively significant higher scores (7.58) on social network compared to those staying alone after abandonment. Keeping all other factors constant, as compared to elderly widows who were staying alone after being abandoned, those staying with children after widowhood showed lower scores (1.42 times) on social networking post- abandonment irrespective of how many years in their estrangement. Their separation from children can take a toll over their social connectivity whereas who were staying alone have a better capability to deal with isolation. Elderly widows coming from a household with higher standard of living scored very high (3.14 times–0-5 years; 7.92 times –10+ years) on social networking after abandonment compared to those elderly widows who lived in households with low standard of living, keeping every other factors constant. Those elderly widows who reported

moderate or bad self-rated health scored less (3.8 times) on social network compared to those stating good health in longer duration of abandonment(10+years).

Table 1: Multiple linear regression analysis of Social isolation (LSNS-18 scale) measure for Abandoned Elderly Widows according to socio-demographic predictors by the length of their abandonment.

Predictor Variables	Duration of Abandonment		
	0-5 years	6-10 years	10+ years
Age			
60-69 years			
70-79 years	-0.192185***	-1.712501*	1.270751*
80+ years	-1.856693***	-7.133064***	1.426265**
Caste			
SC/ST			
OBC	0.643503	1.227187	-0.1730339*
General	-0.5815659**	-0.6266351*	0.6613987
Place of Residence(before Abandonment)			
Rural			
Urban	1.28583**	0.2128926*	1.415979
Education			
Illiterate			
Literate	-0.2859625	-1.280231	2.768758**
Living arrangement			
Alone			
In-laws	9.925659	7.584928***	1.341143
Children	-1.422548*	-1.425964*	-0.9654768
Relatives	-	-0.3489587	0.1238719
others	11.10349	0.0327645	-0.7842671
Type of Family			
Nuclear			
Joint	0.113225*	2.244544	-0.3718992***
Relationship with Husband's Family			
Poor			
Average	0.7810671	-7.072106**	0.2560776
Good	-1.768942	-	-3.390688
Number of Children			
None			
1 Child	0.9679555	0.3224829	1.020905
2 Children	1.709045	2.047884	1.201334
3 Children	2.355184	2.251386	2.71867***
More than 3 Children	2.927943*	5.124054***	-0.8319592***
Working Status			
Ever Worked			
Never Worked	1.553052	-0.0423709	-1.392692***
Standard of Living			
Low			
Medium	2.742209**	2.081116	0.6207479
High	3.144529**	7.928859***	0.2584077
Self-rated Health			
Good			
Moderate	-0.2087111	0.3456022	-3.801697***
Bad	-1.009798	-1.871234	-3.780868**
Income support			
Self-Supported			
Supported Govt/NGO	-0.6593441	-0.3351957	-1.109424*

An Independent sample group t-test was run to compare means of MHC-SF and its subscales between those abandoned elderly widows living in OAH/Shelter homes and those living on the streets/outside temples and on the Ghats basically homeless in their current state of living. The test assumes that the variance of the two samples are equal. Before conducting the t-test, all the assumptions were checked and satisfied. The major assumption of the test was to check whether population variances of the two groups: σ_1 and σ_2 are equal. Bartlett's test for equal variances was conducted to test the null hypothesis that the sample variance are equal. The value of the statistic

was $\chi^2(1) = 0.2325$. The corresponding significance level (χ^2 with 1 degree of freedom) was 0.630, so we cannot reject the assumption that the variances are homogeneous.

Table 2. shows the results from the Independent sample group t-test which compared the means of the two sample group living in OAH/Shelter Homes and Homeless abandoned elderly widow in context to their mental health which is described as General wellbeing by adding all the 14 items of MHC-SF scale and three subscales i.e. Emotional Well-being, Social Well-being and Psychological Well-being. The results showed that elderly widows who were homeless had statistically significantly lower general well-being (35.08 ± 1.29 MHC-SF score) at the end of the experiment compared to those staying in OAH/Shelter homes (38.51 ± 0.72 MHC-SF score), $t(358) = 2.2777$, $p = 0.023$. The result was similar for the different domains of Wellbeing as well.

Table 2: Independent Sample group t-test of the Mental Health Continuum Short Form (MHC-SF) and its sub-scales measured for Abandoned Elderly Widows in OAH/ Shelter Homes compared with Homeless group

Dependent Var.	Group	Count	Mean	Std. Err.	Std. Dev.	[95% C.I.]		t-statistics	P-value
General Wellbeing (Total MHC-SF Score)	OAH/Shelter Home	280	38.51	0.72	12.02	37.10	39.93	2.2777	0.0233
	Homeless	80	35.08	1.29	11.51	32.51	37.64		
	Combined	360	37.75	0.63	11.98	36.51	38.99		
	Difference	-	3.44	1.51		0.47	6.41		
Emotional Wellbeing	OAH/Shelter Home	280	8.39	0.19	3.24	8.01	8.77	2.2735	0.0236
	Homeless	80	7.48	0.33	2.99	6.81	8.14		
	Combined	360	8.19	0.17	3.20	7.86	8.52		
	Difference	-	0.92	0.40		0.12	1.71		
Social Wellbeing	OAH/Shelter Home	280	12.98	0.20	3.29	12.59	13.36	2.0779	0.0384
	Homeless	80	12.13	0.33	3.00	11.46	12.79		
	Combined	360	12.79	0.17	3.24	12.45	13.12		
	Difference	-	0.85	0.41		0.05	1.65		
Psychological Wellbeing	OAH/Shelter Home	280	17.15	0.36	6.01	16.44	17.85	2.2154	0.0274
	Homeless	80	15.48	0.64	5.74	14.20	16.75		
	Combined	360	16.78	0.32	5.98	16.15	17.40		
	Difference	-	1.67	0.75		0.19	3.16		

Figure 2. illustrates the psychological behaviour of the abandoned elderly widows. A total of 43% registered that they always feel unhappy and restless. About 47% sometimes and only 9% never felt unhappy and restless. The percentage of widows who always lose their temper was 39%. A good number of widows (46%) also reported that they sometimes lost their temper. Majority of the widows (44%) had sometimes and 23% had never felt worried, scared or insecure. A percentage of 46% of the widows sometimes felt lonely even when surrounded by people. Most of (46%) of the respondents reported that they were always nervous or anxious. Approximately 41% of the widows who were always annoyed or irritable. These data clearly portrays that widows suffer from psychological vulnerabilities and are often face difficulties managing their behavioural response towards traumatic life experiences.

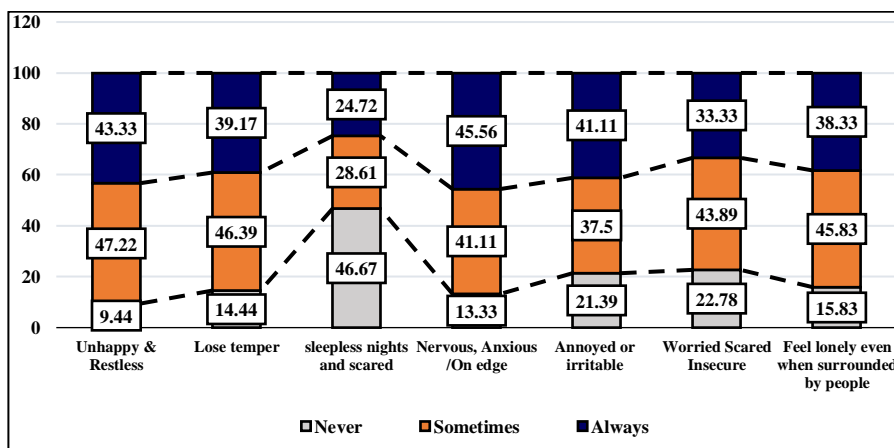


Figure 2. Percentage distribution of elderly widows showing psychological impact post abandonment