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Impact of Widowhood on the Status of Elderly Women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

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Abstract

In Pakistan, the demographic transition that started in the 1990s has caused an increase in the population of elderly people including aged widows. Demographic transitions, as well as socio-cultural changes, have adversely affected the social status of elderly widows in Pakistani society. The objective of this research study is to investigate the impact of widowhood on the social status of elderly women in District Dir Lower, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. This research study collected data from elderly widows in District Dir Lower, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Respondents were identified from a list of elderly widows collected from the office of Pakistan Baitul Mal. Data was collected from the respondents through in-depth interviews. The findings of the research show that the social status of elderly widows has declined in Pakistani society. Elderly widows are faced with poverty as well as health discrimination. There is minimum or no involvement of elderly widows in decision-making. They are usually deprived of their share in property inheritance. Award of share in the property, the introduction of compulsory old age pension, Governmental financial relief, and the creation and participation of elderly widows in income-generating activities may positively impact their status.

Keywords: Elderly Widows; Poverty; Property Inheritance; Health Disparities; Non-Involvement in Decision-Making

Introduction

Men and women pass through the same biological, psychological, economic, and social changes in their old age (Neuhaus, 1982). Among the changes, one of the most common changes is the experience of widowhood in the later part of life. Widowhood is defined as the marital status of a woman or man once his or her spouse passes away. Widowhood brings significant social and psychological implications for the living partner (Keister &

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Destro, 2008). Generally, widowhood brings adverse psycho-social impacts irrespective of Gender. However, among the elderly population, old women in general and widows in particular are more vulnerable (Raj, 2015). Loss of social status is a common problem associated with the experience of widows. The life of an old widow is, particularly, underprivileged in patriarchal societies, where women are observed as 2nd class citizens and widows are considered as 3rd class citizens (Nnodim, Ike & Ekumankama, 2013; Loomba Foundation, 2015). Moreover, Sheykhi (2006) & Sahoo (2014) also argue that old widows go through long-term negative consequences, which include; psychological, physical, economic, social, and emotional.

The economic aspect is one of the important determinants of socio-economic status. Financial hardships play a central position in the problems of old widows. Financial destitution and deterioration in social status are considered global issues of widows (Chen, 2001). Widows face poverty as the husband is considered the breadwinner of his wife and family. Widows are generally unlikely to continue engaging in income-generating activities like their late husbands (Nnodim et al., 2013). Widowhood therefore leads to lower incomes, poverty, and lower living standards for older women. Global data shows that the economic impact of widowhood is clear, with 115 million widows living below the poverty line (Raj, 2015).

Almost all widows face poverty, however, the financial difficulties are particularly acute among older widows who themselves have never participated in income-generating activities or whose husbands' incomes are not attractive. In addition, the physical decline of elderly widows also poses a barrier to their participation in income-generating activities. Furthermore, disinheriting women can also contribute to the large-scale impoverishment of widows (Choudhury & Leonesio, 1997).

The right to inheritance in property may alleviate the poverty of old widows; however, women are usually deprived of the right to inheritance due to dowry gifts, which they have received at the time of their marriages. In addition, the stronghold of a patriarchal system, misinterpretation of religious values pose abundant hurdles for women, poor inheritance laws and the weak mechanism for the implementation of inheritance laws also restrict widows from inheritance rights (Jan, Alam, Khan, Khan & Shakoor, 2022; Awuor, 2013). A widow’s demand for property inheritance can lead to their death. The family `members use all means to deprive a widow of property inheritance. If a widow files a lawsuit, for property inheritance, the family members cannot defend the case. Under such circumstances, a widow is motivated to relinquish voluntarily from property rights (Zehra, 2008). Thus, deprivation of widows from property inheritance leads to poverty among them.

Social participation and social status have a close association. The productive and active engagement of senior citizens in a society is considered a central element of successful aging. However, the social participation of old widows in the domestic sphere is generally considered to be low (Sabzwari & Azhar, 2011). Old widows are generally ignored in important family issues. The social participation of old widows depends upon several factors, such as poverty level, health status, educational status, and the environment of the family(Zeng, Liu & Linda, 2006).

Review of the Literature

Widowhood, generally, brings disempowerment and consequently weak social status to old women. The weak physical condition, poverty, modernization, and the patriarchal social setup adversely affect the decision-making power of old widows. Moreover, cognitive decline, when combined with widowhood may, further, impair the decision-making capabilities of old widows **(**Ortz, 2013**)**. The daughter-in-law steadily takes over the important decisions, about important domestic affairs (Rajasekhar, 2013). In those cultures, where the sense of familial responsibility is strong, old widows are displaced from their assigned roles, in the name of affection, by the young family member **(**Gilliland & Picado, 2000).

However, some old widows avail the decision-making power in the house. The reasons for their decision-making power are the brain drain of their children, the lack of male child/children, and when their children are too young to manage the responsibilities of the house. They have to shoulder the paternal responsibilities in respect of their children. On the one hand, this situation brings empowerment to old widows, but on the other hand, it overburdens women by taking extra responsibilities, some of which are beyond their physical capacities to manage them properly. Thus, the physical and mental health of such women is, further, deteriorated (Ahmad, 2011). Biological breakdown, in addition to unfavorable social factors, plays an important role in the deterioration of the physical health of old widows. Elderly women, including widows, equally suffer from long-lasting health problems (Ortz, 2013).

In Pakistan population of senior citizens with disabilities is increasing. The disability rate for people aged 50-54 years is almost double than total population having less than 50 years of age. In the 1000 population disability rate is almost 90.0 for senior citizens age 75+ (Ahmad, 2011). Chief disabilities among older women include deafness, physical disabilities, mental retardation, and blindness (Saeed, Shoaib & Ilyas, 2011). Moreover, in old age, musculoskeletal and cardiovascular diseases are the utmost common causes of morbidity (Qureshi, 2012).

One of the main reasons, for women's consistent medical problems in old age, is the poverty of the family. Old women, generally, do not express their medical needs, particularly when the family members are poor. Old women believe that their demand for health needs may cause inconvenience and financial burden for the family (Soneja, 2012). In addition, health discrimination also exists against older men and women. However, women face more health discrimination than men, on the grounds of the prevailing socio-cultural practices, such as widowhood, weaker economic position, and submissive socialization (Ali & Kiani, 2003).

Marital status plays an important role in the successful psychological and emotional health of the aging population. Spouse availability may be a substantial source of backing in life especially in old age (Victor, 1994). Loss of spouse leads to poor mental health among elderly women (Furukawa, Harai, Hirai, Fujihara, Kitamura & Takahashi, 1998). Mental illness, among old widows, is a collective psychological problem. Mental illness, among elderly widows, ranges from minor psychological disorders, such as depression, stress, and anxiety to serious illnesses, such as schizophrenia or personality disorders. Depression is generally found among elderly widows and is considered the outcome of social isolation. In the age group of 65 years and above, the problem of depression may be linked with dissatisfaction, hopelessness, and mortality with life, chronic sickness, loss of friends, retirement, and departure of grown-up children living far away from their old mother with less contact due to of their busy schedule (Adams, Sanders &Auth, 2004).

Considering the problem of elderly widows, the Pakistani government has taken several measures to address their sufferings. For example, the government tries to address the problems of old widows through the Pakistan Bait Ul Mall, financial assistance from the Benazir Income Support Programme, and the provision of sewing machines by the Social Welfare and Development Department. Moreover, the old deserving widows are eligible to get financial assistance from the Zakat and Usher department. Old widows are also entitled to receive a prescribed amount of the pension of their husbands (Ahad, 2012). Literature reveals that widowhood brings different problems for elderly women. Because of issues of inaccessibility and cultural norms, the current literature on Pakistan regarding widows fails to address the issues of widows belonging to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. This study is the first of its kind to raise the issues of elderly widows. Through qualitative methodology, this study attempts to explore the impact of widowhood on the social status of elderly women, particularly on economic and social aspects of life.

Aim of the Study

The purpose of this study was to know the impact of widowhood on the social status of elderly widows in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Research Methodology: Methods and Materials

Qualitative methodology was used for this research study. Qualitative research strives to capture meanings and the essence of human experiences holistically, about various aspects. The researcher learns about the phenomena through the eyes of persons experiencing it (Creswell, 2007; Kielmann, Cataldo & Seeley, 2012). The target population list was collected from the Pakistan Bait-Ul-Mal office. The list is made up of widows of different ages. Widows under the age of 60 were excluded from the list. Respondents (60 years and above) were randomly selected from the list. In addition, interviewees were identified through personal contact. Data were collected from the respondents through in-depth interviews with the help of female research assistants. In-depth interviews were chosen as a data tool for qualitative research because qualitative research focuses on experiences or data that cannot be explained with numbers (Hancock, Windridge & Ockleford, 2009).

As far as the research ethics are concerned, the researchers followed all the considerations related to research ethics throughout this study. Before the interview, the researcher briefed the respondents about the aim of the study and got their consent for the interview. The privacy of the respondents was fully ensured. Additionally, whenever the researcher approached the interviewees to collect information, pseudonyms were used to maintain their anonymity.

Results and Discussion

From the collected data the following themes emerged during the process of transcription.

Widowhood and Social Status of Elderly Women

In Pakistani culture, elderly widows face a decline/loss of social status. In Pakhtun culture, elderly widows once enjoyed a high social status, but the high social status of elderly widows is gradually changing. The reasons for their decline in social status are the decline of social and religious values in old age, the disintegration of the joint family system, modernization, and the employment of young women in the labor market (Ahmed, 2014). One interviewee recounted her experience of the impact of widowhood on social status:

> *"I am nothing without my late husband. The word 'widow' itself is a sufficient explanation of the decline in decline in social status"*

The changes in the social status of older women have led to some psychosocial problems. In male-dominated societies like Pakistan, most women occupy a secondary social status.

In these societies, being widowed leads to unemployment, non-participation in decision-making, social isolation and avoidance; reduced space for older widows, health discrimination, disinheritance, poverty, and abuse (Saeed et. al., 2011). Respondents to this study commented in different ways on the impact of widowhood on their social status. In this regard, one interviewee shared her experience:

> *"After widowhood, a new life full of thorns is teasing me. Widowhood has wrenched my health, social status, decision-making power, and so many other things".*

The comments of the respondents reflect male dominance in Pakistani society. In Pakistani society, the majority of women particularly in rural areas are economically and socially dependent upon their spouses. After their husband's deaths, a widow is considered dependent in different spheres of life including socially, economically, and psychologically. This dependency ultimately affects the social status of elderly widows.

Widowhood and Poverty

Widowhood among elderly women has a close association with poverty. Poverty is viewed as a central problem of elderly widows. According to Hancock, Windridge & Ockleford, (2009), widowhood is accompanied by a drop in the economic well-being of women. A husband is considered the main source of breadwinner in Pakhtun culture, and as a result, most women lack earning skills. Moreover, at the time of the respondents' school-going age, there was no concept of schooling and formal education. A respondent narrated the situation of education during her childhood as;

> *"During my childhood, this region (universe of the study) was an independent state. There was no school during that time because the ruler/king was in favor of education"*

In the past Pakhtun cultural values in the name of *Purdah* (veil) discouraged women's education and formal sector employment. However, the trend of women's employment is gradually gaining popularity. Some of the poor respondents whose children are unable to earn were participating in income-generating activities. For such widows, there are limited employment opportunities. They have to work in someone's house, as a servant, or have to collect donations offered by the rich members of the community.

The economic status of a widow is also linked with the economic background of the family and her husband as well. A widow, who belongs to an economically stable family or the profession of her deceased husband carrying attractive earnings; such widows face minimum or no economic problems. The economic status of elderly widows also depends

upon the healthy social relations between the widowed mother and her earning children. Pakhtun cultural values are considered old-age friendly. The primary data collected from the respondents show that those respondents availed high social status whose children followed the Pakhtun cultural and religious values regarding the old parents.

The primary data shows that the right to property inheritance also plays a role in the socio-economic status of elderly widows. In Pakhtun culture, women are usually deprived of their right to property inheritance. Very few respondents have availed the right to property inheritance. Parental property is usually distributed among male family members. Usually, women file suits in a court of law to get this right. However, when the male family members come to know about this, they try to convince such a woman at minimum cost or such a woman faces a social boycott from parental family members. A respondent narrated her experience of demand for property inheritance as;

> *"My brothers refused to assign me my share in parental property. I have to file a suit in a court of law. Although I got my share, however, my brothers have excluded me from their family…"*

Negligence of women in property inheritance pushes them towards poverty in old age.

Widowhood and Non-Involvement in Decision Making

In Pakhtun culture, women are generally considered disempowered. In the past, women were disempowered at a young age and empowered at old age. The mother-in-law exercises authority in the domestic sphere, while the father-in-law holds authority outside the domestic sphere. This process goes on until the family adopts the nuclear mode of accommodation, where the wife becomes the head of the household. The authority of elderly widows is replaced with the authority of the daughter-in-law. Many of my respondents informed me that they faced abuses at the hands of their daughters-in-law, although it is kept confidential in the name of family honor. Keeping in view the expected abuse of daughter-in-law, mother-in-laws usually prefer a close female relative to be her daughter-in-law. A relative daughter-in-law is preferred as she is expected to be kinder towards her mother-in-law as compared to one married from a non-relative family. Widowhood not only disempowers the widow but also her children. In this regard, a respondent says:

> *"In Pakhtun culture, the community even ignore the children/sons of a widow and pass different negative comments on their decision making power"*

After widowhood, those women whose children are young and are unable to earn and manage the household responsibilities, the mother under such circumstances, shoulders the household headship responsibilities, known as female household headship.

Widowhood Decline in Health Status

WHO (1999) views health as a state where an individual is physically, mentally, and socially sound. Health is not only the absence of disease or infirmity. Access to good health services is one of the fundamental human rights. Increases in life expectancy have led to more women living beyond the average life expectancy (United Nations Population Funds and Help Age International, 2012). Increasing average life expectancy and weakening of strong social bonds and supporting cultural values lead to multiple health complications for elderly widows (Loomba Foundation, 2015). In Pakistan, the available health facilities particularly in the public sector are substandard. Moreover, Geriatrics is not recognized as a separate medical field (Sabzwari & Azhar, 2011). In Pakistan, economically stable people prefer treatment in private hospitals as compared to public sector hospitals. Elderly widows usually lack financial resources, so they have to get treatment in public sector hospitals. Sometimes, the elderly widows, particularly in rural areas are unable to avail medical treatment in government hospitals due to cultural norms as well as poverty. Instead of treatment in private hospitals, they rely upon local medical practitioners, who are usually not eligible for practice. In this regard, respondent comments:

> *"Usually, I do not get treatment in hospital. When I inform my children, regarding my illness, they either bring medicine or invite the local practitioner (paramedical staff member) for my medical treatment."*

The health status of elderly widows tends to decline with advancing age, and very often the health problems, are further, aggravated due to neglect, discrimination, social deprivation, and inappropriate dietary intake (Balamurugan & Ramathirtham, 2012). Most of the respondents of this study believe that widowhood has adversely affected their health status. Their health demands are ignored by the family members, particularly sons, with the comments that age-based diseases cannot be controlled by medicines.

The busy schedule of the working population does not allow them to spare time for the medical treatment of their elderly widowed mothers. A respondent says:

> *"Although I have resources to afford my medical treatment, my son is usually busy with his job and cannot spare time to take me to hospitals. I request someone to take me to the hospital."*

Cultural factors, such as discrimination and restriction of the movement of women out of the house also create hurdles in the way of women seeking health services. Some of the respondents of this study reported health discrimination. Regarding health discrimination, a respondent says:

> *"I am living with my married son. His wife and children get medical facilities on time, but in my case, the health services are usually delayed".*

Regarding restrictions on women's movement out of the house, a respondent said:

> *"In Pakhtun culture, the movement of a woman out of the house, without a male family member, is condemned. I cannot move alone while male family members also find it difficult to take me to the hospital regularly".*

In short, the social status of elderly women is linked with their marital status. The social status of elderly widows in Pakhtun culture is changing as a result of the changing socio-cultural environment in the form of family nuclearization, modernization as well as decline of religious and Pakhtun cultural values. Several factors are responsible for the poor socio-economic status of the widows e.g. illiteracy, lack of employment opportunities, cultural restrictions on women's education and employment, and deprivation of women from property inheritance. As a result of the decline in socio-economic status, the elderly widows are confronted with different issues, especially in the form of health discrimination, weak health, and disempowerment in the family circle.

Conclusions

In Pakistani society, the cultural values related to the special status of elders are changing. Pakhtun society is a male-dominated society and married women are usually dependent upon their husbands. Resultantly husband death adversely affects the social status of elderly widows. Moreover, elderly widows are unable to contribute to the family. As a result, the social status of elderly widows declines. Furthermore, elderly widows in Pakhtun society face poverty because their husbands shoulder the bread-winning responsibility. Elderly widows face poverty due to a lack of financial resources, old age pension, deprivation from inheritance, and illiteracy. In addition, widowhood negatively affects the health status of elderly widows. Due to physical weakness and shock of husband death elderly widows are unable to cope with the health challenges (Mahmood, 2008). Moreover, the limited availability of health facilities further aggravates the health conditions of elderly widows.

Elderly widows face loss of authority because the authority of women is generally linked with their husbands. Women avail authority as long as their husbands are alive. After widowhood, they are usually ignored by family members in decision-making. This research study has some limitations and cannot cover the entire aspects of the topic. Some other aspects of this topic e.g. resilience strategies of widows, and problems of childless widows need research studies.

Recommendations

- Economic downfall plays a prominent role in old age problems. Following economic recommendations may improve the social status of elderly widows.
- To grant women access to property inheritance by Pakistani society.
- To impart training as well as soft loans to women in the field of their interest to ensure their income in old age.
- Elderly women should continue control over their personal property and income as long as possible. They should not hand over their property and income to their children.
- To introduce the concept of old age pension by the Government of Pakistan in the private and informal sectors.
- The government of Pakistan should introduce the practice of subsidy in terms of utility bills for poor families having senior citizens.

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