



EXPLORING WIDOWS' SUPPORT SYSTEMS: A SOCIOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the level of perceived social support among widowed women. Total of 260-volunteered widow participated in this study; they were randomly chosen from the list of beneficiaries of the widow pension scheme from Punjab and Union Territory, Chandigarh social welfare Department. Results revealed that higher proportion of respondents in the present study reported support of their parents in all possible terms after widowhood. A large number of respondents admitted support from in-laws but less reported support from siblings and relatives.

INTRODUCTION

A large body of research has demonstrated a positive association between aspects of social support and well-being of individual. One of the objectives of the present study was to understand the importance of various support systems in the lives of widows. Widows have been identified as a vulnerable group in India. Simply becoming a widow lowers a woman's social status, as she succumbs to a 'social death' when her husband dies – she may even be viewed as inauspicious, especially if she is too young or lost her husband soon after marriage. Widows also face challenges stemming from both a set of social restrictions that have been placed on them and a lack of social protection. Widowhood is often associated with grief, loneliness, loss of life satisfaction, low morale, income inadequacy, increased rate of physical and mental ailments. Traditionally, kin and family were the usual care givers to widows. Extended family network (siblings, nieces or nephews, or grandchildren) existed as potential resources or contributors. Since there were so many restrictions on the movement of the widows, family members provided social security to these widows. Widows often experience economic discrimination, alienation, exclusion from social functions, and feelings of hopelessness (Chen & Drez, 1995). In North India particularly, widows face immense difficulties in seeking gainful employment and receive little social support, culminating in poorer health and higher mortality levels than the general population.

With the onset of structural changes in the family set up due to modernization there is decline in the role of kith and kin. This paper attempts to examine the support system of the widows in meeting the demands of widowhood.

Absence of male spouse causes stress and grief, thereby enhancing the need for social support. The widow seeks support from not only from her own parents but also from the family of her deceased husband. However, due to social stigma and ostracism attached to widowhood there is a lack of support. Adilakshmi (1988) perceives that consequent on widowhood, economic support is most frequently sought by the widows, but remains the most unmet need. Most widows, upon the loss of a

spouse experience a reduction of income and a related decline in their standard of living (Heinman 1982; Rogers 1981). Lopata (1979, 1980) and Rogers (1981) found that most widows rely on either their own earnings or their late husband's social security as income. In cases where the widow has few or outdated job skills, employment maybe unavailable, unsatisfactory, or both (Heinman 1982). Gohilvaani (2006) has argued that there are more challenges before widows with children (especially girl children). Widows find it really difficult to bring up children, especially girl children singlehandedly like funding their education, marriage etc. Problem gathers momentum where widows are illiterate and economically weak. In some cases, children emerge as only source of emotional support for them (Nair, 2006). Singh and Gill (1986) have revealed that widows confront difficulties in bringing up children, taking care of their health and inculcating discipline in them. Being single parent for a widow, it is hard to play dual roles of father and mother facing multiple problems (Giri and Khanna 2012; Patil, 1988). Widows need social support from family, relatives, friends, neighbours, colleagues, and bereaved peers (Field & Schuldberg, 2011). Houston et al. (2016) conducted one of these studies through 42 in-depth interviews with Nepali widows. Low social support was a common theme, specifically in emotional and instrumental support, which may increase women's vulnerability to mistreatment and economic insecurity. Chaudhary and Chadha (2014), on the basis of comparative study among two groups of Indian widowed, one of the women who became a widow at the age of 25–35 years, and the other group consisted of women who lost their husbands after 55 years and above. The results showed that the social support level was nearly the same for both groups.

'The relationship with friends and relatives provides much of social capital people use to deal with daily life, seize opportunities and reduce uncertainties' (Kadushin, 1981). Rosenberg and Anspach, (1973) maintains that widowhood poses a series of alterations in the kin and non-kin ties due to the individual's inability to retain or maintain social contacts. Social networks are certainly considered supportive as they offer comfort, information, material aid and other resources



(Caplan, 1974). The change in relationships that widows experience is not only observed in social relations but also within a woman's familial ties as well. Extant literature notes that following the death of a husband, a widow's relationships with her family can become strained. Pandey and Gupta (2019) indicate that widows are often seen as a burden to their families. The need of financial support comes as the foremost one to make the both ends meet in the life of widows. The need for emotional, moral and other kinds of support though provide comfort for the temporary phase but not in the long run for widows. In the present paper an effort has been made to have an overview of support mechanism for widows.

OBJECTIVES

1. To highlight the socio-economic profile of widow pensioners living in Chandigarh and Mohali district, Punjab.
2. To understand the importance of various support systems in the lives of widows in Chandigarh and Mohali district, Punjab.

METHODOLOGY

Widow pensioners drawing pension from the Social Welfare Department from UT Chandigarh and Mohali district of Punjab were included in the study. The widows who didn't remarry and had at least one child been the unit of analysis for the present study. The research design was both exploratory and descriptive. Through simple random sampling, a total sample of 260 widows (130 from Chandigarh and 130 from Mohali district, Punjab) was drawn. A structured interview schedule was used to collect information. In order to measure support, it has been divided into four broad categories, physical, psychological, economical and social. For each of these a specific set of questions were asked from the respondents.

RESULTS

In the present study, 62 percent of respondents experienced widowhood before reaching the age of 35. The distribution of respondents between Chandigarh and Mohali showed minimal variation. Notably, 27 percent of respondents became widowed between the ages of 35-40, with a higher percentage in Mohali (31 percent) compared to Chandigarh (22 percent). Among

those whose husbands passed away before the age of 35, the percentage was 34, with Chandigarh slightly surpassing Mohali by 2 percent. For respondents whose husbands passed away between the ages of 40-45 and 45-50, the percentages were 8 and 3 percent, respectively. In both cases, Chandigarh had higher percentages than Mohali. Notably, Mohali had a higher percentage (19 percent) of husbands passing away between 40-45, and a higher percentage (7 percent) for the age group 45-50.

The study revealed that 52 percent of respondents belonged to the General caste, while 31 percent were from SC castes, with a higher percentage in Mohali. Education levels indicated that 41 percent of respondents and 36 percent of their husbands had attained primary education, with Mohali having a higher percentage. Conversely, Chandigarh had higher percentages for illiteracy (26 percent respondents, 15 percent husbands) and matriculation-level education (17 percent respondents, 34 percent husbands).

In terms of employment, 36 percent of respondents in Chandigarh were self-employed, engaged in activities like stitching clothes or providing tuitions. In Mohali, 17 percent and 13 percent of respondents worked as daily wagers and domestic help, respectively. Mohali also had a higher percentage (34 percent) of respondents not currently employed. Additionally, 32 percent of respondents had a family income below Rs. 12,000 per annum, while 15 percent earned between Rs. 12,000 and Rs. 24,000 per month, with a higher percentage in Chandigarh. Respondents earning above Rs. 50,000 annually comprised only 10 percent, with Chandigarh again having a higher percentage in this category.

Support by Parents

Support of parents is very significant in the life of an individual in general and widows in particular because it helps them in becoming emotionally amicable, economically independent and socially adjusted in the society. Aruna and Reddy (2001) state that parents were also the key source of aid regarding large finances, which came without any interest; supplied provisions; and were the core advisors. After attaining widowhood widows look at their near and dear ones for financial, psychological and moral support especially their parents. Therefore, an attempt was made to find out whether respondents received support from their parents.

Table 1 Distribution showing support by parents after widowhood

Response	Chandigarh		Mohali		Total	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Yes	91	70	83	64	174	67
No	39	30	47	36	86	33
Total	130	100	130	100	260	100

*Percentage has been rounded off to the nearest digit.

Table 1 illustrates the support system provided to the respondents by their parents. A significant majority of the respondents, accounting for 67 percent, mentioned receiving immediate help from their parents. Notably, 70 percent of these respondents were from Chandigarh. On the contrary, parents of 33 percent of the respondents did not extend support, with 36 percent of them hailing from Mohali and 30 percent from Chandigarh.

The results suggest that a substantial number of respondents received support from their parents, highlighting the fact that respondents tend to rely on their parents for assistance. Among those who did not receive support, some respondents cited their parents' dependence on others and economic hardship as reasons. A few respondents mentioned that their parents were no longer alive to provide support, while others admitted that their parents were elderly, immobile, and unable to offer



assistance. Results endorse the findings of Aruna and Reddy (2001).

Type of support given by Parents

After the death of spouse, widows feel miserable especially those who are illiterate and have no source of livelihood.

Parents provide immediate support to their grieved daughters. The support can be economical, psychological and social in nature. The respondents were asked to mention the type of support given by their parents.

Table 1.1 Distribution showing type of support offered by parents

Type of support offered	Chandigarh		Mohali		Total	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Not applicable	39	30	47	36	86	33
Economical	46	35	40	31	86	33
Psychological	34	27	38	29	72	28
Social	8	6	4	3	12	4
Taking care of children	3	2	1	1	4	2
Total	130	100	130	100	260	100

*Percentage has been rounded off to the nearest digit.

Table 1.1 shows the type of support provided to the respondents by their parents. 33 percent of respondents indicated that their parents provided support in the form of sufficient funds to cover immediate expenditures required during widowhood. The majority of these respondents were from Chandigarh. About 28 percent of respondents mentioned that their parents intended to offer emotional support, with a higher percentage from Mohali compared to Chandigarh. Additionally, 4 percent of respondents reported that their parents provided social support in dealing with issues related to widowhood, and in this case, Chandigarh had a higher percentage by 3 percent compared to Mohali. Only 2 percent of respondents stated that their parents assisted in taking care of their children, and among them, a higher percentage was from Chandigarh. The findings of this study suggest that while respondents received support from their parents, it was not necessarily in financial terms.

Support by In-laws

In a patriarchal society, after marriage, a woman spends the major part of her life with her in-laws. A girl is considered to be 'paraya dhan' in her parental home. After her marriage, her rights over her paternal home cease to exist. Although she has rights in her husband's property, after the death of her husband, there is denial of those rights. Aruna and Reddy (2001) found that in-laws play a substantial role across dimensions; their support is unique in precise strands. A sizable proportion act as guardians, express emotional warmth to the children of widows, and participate in discussing family problems. At the time of widowhood, widows assume that taking care of themselves and their children is the prime responsibility of their in-laws after their husbands' death. An effort has been made to find out the role of in-laws in supporting widows

Table 2 Distribution showing support by in-laws

Response	Chandigarh		Mohali		Total	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Yes	86	66	92	70	178	68
No	42	32	36	28	42	32
Total	130	100	130	100	260	100

*Percentage has been rounded off to the nearest digit.

Table 2 describes the support system provided to the respondents by their in-laws. Majority of the respondents i.e. 68 percent stated that timely help was provided to them by their in-laws, and the higher percentage of respondents were from Mohali. In-laws of 32 percent respondents were not alive at the time of widowhood, in this case the percentage of respondents from Chandigarh was higher than that of Mohali by 4 percent. The study specifies that respondents whose in-laws were alive got their in-laws' support. Further widows considered this help as moral responsibility of their in-laws. Respondents whose in-laws were not alive for assistance felt more insecure and

uncertain for their lives ahead. Results support Aruna and Reddy (2001).

Type of support offered by in-laws

Research studies have shown that relations with in-laws change after the death of spouse since he/she is a common bond between them. In Indian society due to joint family system, it is a patrilocal rule of residence. The wife after marriage moves to house of her in-laws. After death of her husband, she continues to stay with them, it is in some cases they are asked to move out. It is in this regard information about type of support provided by in-laws was obtained.



Table 2.1 Distribution showing type of support offered by in-laws

Type of support offered	Chandigarh		Mohali		Total	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Not applicable	44	34	38	30	82	32
Economical	63	48	69	53	132	50
Psychological	16	12	10	7	26	10
Social	6	5	11	8	17	7
Taking care of children	1	1	2	2	3	1
Total	130	100	130	100	260	100

*Percentage has been rounded off to the nearest digit.

Table 2.1 illustrates the various types of support offered by in-laws to the respondents. Approximately half of the respondents reported receiving financial assistance from their in-laws to address sudden essential expenses arising immediately after widowhood, with a greater proportion of respondents were from Mohali. 10 percent of respondents mentioned receiving psychological support from their in-laws, with a higher percentage belonged to Chandigarh compared to Mohali. 7percent of respondents noted that their in-laws provided social support in observing widowhood-related rituals, with a larger

percentage from Mohali. Merely one percent of respondents indicated that their in-laws took responsibility for caring for their children, with a higher percentage being from Mohali.

Support by Siblings

In traditional Indian society, kin and family were the main caregivers to widows. However, with the change in the structure of Indian joint family, this support system is weakening. Therefore, an effort has been made to procure information on support system of provided by siblings.

Table 3 Distribution showing support by siblings at the time of widowhood

Response	Chandigarh		Mohali		Total	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Yes	79	61	87	67	166	64
No	51	39	43	33	94	36
Total	130	100	130	100	260	100

*Percentage has been rounded off to the nearest digit.

Table 3 illustrates the support system offered to the respondents by their own siblings. The majority of respondents, accounting for 64 percent, reported receiving appropriate support from their siblings, with a higher percentage from Mohali. Siblings of 36 percent of respondents attended funeral rituals, mainly for the sake of formality, and among them, a higher percentage of respondents were from Chandigarh. The study indicates that siblings intentionally refrained from involving themselves in the affairs of the respondents' post-widowhood. This reluctance stemmed from their fear that active involvement might lead to a lifelong responsibility for both the respondents and their children.

research that many siblings provide emotional support and various forms of financial assistance, including substantial aid. They also engage in activities such as sharing farm produce, purchasing seasonal goods on behalf of widows, and exchanging special delicacies. Moreover, siblings contribute to services such as transportation of goods and significant purchases, and they participate in childcare responsibilities, such as transporting children to school and assisting with decisions regarding education and careers. Siblings actively support their widowed sisters in matters related to education, career opportunities, and arranging marriages for their children. Therefore, it is essential to analyze the support provided by siblings in this study to recognize their significant role in the lives of widows.

Type of support offered by siblings

When widows face hardships, they often turn to their siblings for assistance. Aruna and Reddy (2001) discovered in their

Table 3.1 Distribution showing type of support offered by siblings

Type of support offered	Chandigarh		Mohali		Total	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Not applicable	51	39	43	33	94	36
Economical	29	22	33	25	62	24
Psychological	44	34	48	37	92	35
Social	5	4	2	2	7	3
Taking care of children	1	1	4	3	5	2
Total	130	100	130	100	260	100

*Percentage has been rounded off to the nearest digit.



Table 3.1 depicts what kind of support was provided to the respondents by their siblings. There were 35 percent respondents who were offered psychological support by their siblings, amongst them the higher percentage of respondents were from Mohali. There were 24 percent respondents who reported that their siblings offered economical support to incur abrupt vital expenditures to be done at the time of widowhood, out of which the percentage of respondents from Mohali was higher than that of Chandigarh. There were 3 percent respondents who informed that their siblings supported them socially, wherein the higher percentage of respondents were from Chandigarh. There were only 2 percent respondents whose siblings offered help in taking care of their children, in this case higher percentage of respondents were from Mohali.

The study unveils that siblings did not consider taking care of widows and their children as social responsibility and provide support to respondents for a temporary phase.

Support by Relatives

Relatives connected through blood or marriage play a crucial role in providing moral support rather than financial assistance to widows. Elderly relatives are often called upon to oversee the household and care for children when widows are away for work. Additionally, widows often confide in these relatives, sharing problems that they cannot discuss with their own children. Therefore, it was essential to comprehend the support provided by relatives in the lives of widows.

Table 4 Distribution showing support by relatives after widowhood

Response	Chandigarh		Mohali		Total	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Yes	32	25	46	35	78	30
No	98	75	84	65	182	70
Total	130	100	130	100	260	100

*Percentage has been rounded off to the nearest digit.

Table 4 expresses the support system provided to the respondents by their relatives. Most of the respondents i.e. 70 percent respondents reported that their relatives did not come forward to support them, amongst them higher percentage of respondents were from Chandigarh. There were 30 percent respondents who stated that their relatives gave them full support, out of which higher percentage of respondents were from Mohali. Findings indicate that most of the relatives were neither economically sound enough nor had enough time to

help respondents out owing to their own familial responsibilities.

Type of support offered by relatives

In the traditional joint family system, widows used to receive not only physical security but also emotional safety. Kinsmen played a crucial role in the well-being of the widows and their children. The respondents were asked to provide information regarding this matter.

Table 4.1 Distribution showing type of support offered by relatives before widowhood

Type of support offered	Chandigarh		Mohali		Total	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Not applicable	98	75	84	65	182	70
Economical	1	1	4	3	5	2
Psychological	23	18	32	24	55	21
Social	8	6	10	8	18	7
Total	130	100	130	100	260	100

*Percentage has been rounded off to the nearest digit.

Table 4.1 delineates the types of support provided to the respondents by their relatives. 21percent of the respondents received psychological support from their relatives, with a higher proportion hailing from Mohali. 7 percent of respondents indicated that their relatives offered social support, with a greater percentage from Mohali. Additionally, 2percent of respondents mentioned receiving financial assistance from their relatives for conducting death rituals, with a higher percentage from Mohali compared to Chandigarh. These findings suggest that relatives are more supportive in Mohali.

A higher percentage of respondents in the current study reported receiving support from their parents in various forms after becoming widows. These findings corroborate the results of Aruna and Reddy's study (2001). Respondents whose parents were alive received support, either financial or non-financial, as widows typically looked to their parents for assistance. However, those whose parents had passed away faced greater emotional challenges in adapting to their new circumstances.

A significant portion of respondents also received support from their in-laws, including economic, psychological, and social assistance. Half of the respondents reported receiving economic support from their in-laws. Interestingly, widows' siblings were not perceived as having a social responsibility to care for them and their children, providing only temporary support in some

DISCUSSION

As widows navigate their individual journeys through grief, loss, or trauma following the death of a spouse, they may also encounter economic insecurity, discrimination, stigmatization, and harmful traditional practices related to their marital status.



cases. A minority of respondents received support from friends, with a higher percentage from Chandigarh compared to Mohali. The findings underscore that many relatives, constrained by economic limitations and familial responsibilities, were unable to provide extensive assistance to the respondents. Some respondents mentioned receiving aid from NGOs, particularly in Mohali, which helped them and their children become self-sufficient through job-oriented training programs in fields like beauty and culture, stitching, and patient care.

The research unveils a resilient pattern: widows, alongside their children, form a cohesive unit, pooling their resources to navigate the challenges they confront. This highlights the crucial role of extended family, particularly parents and in-laws, in offering enduring support, even in urban settings and during crises. While friends and neighbors may offer temporary relief, it's the unwavering support of parents and in-laws that proves most valuable for widows and their children. This study emphasizes the significant contribution of parents in assisting widows in coping with trauma and rebuilding their lives.

Factors such as poverty, lack of education, and limited job skills often compel widows to rely on others for financial stability or seek employment outside the home. The findings underscore the profound impact of spousal loss on widows from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, whose households undergo significant economic upheaval following their husbands' deaths.

CONCLUSION

Widowhood brings about profound feelings of isolation, loneliness, and economic hardship. In India, a country with socialist principles, the government implements social welfare policies, including pension schemes for widows. Despite these measures, widows continue to face numerous challenges related to health, mental well-being, finances, social integration, and personal safety. Over time, these challenges often exacerbate, further complicating their lives. Widows express a heartfelt plea for unwavering support from their families as they navigate this difficult transition. Additionally, they hope for a compassionate and understanding attitude from society at large, acknowledging the unique struggles they endure.

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