



EXPERIENCES OF SPOUSAL BEREAVEMENT: A QUALITATIVE STUDY FROM KASHMIR

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ABSTRACT

The death of a spouse at an earlier-than-expected stage of life has the potential to overburden the lives of women with multiple stressors. The Off-time conjugal bereavement brings the crisis-based disruption of one's identity as changes in relationships and once-established roles need to be re-evaluated. For women in Indian societies, it is more difficult. The prevailing culture, traditions, and customs in Indian societies present multiple problems for widows in their social lives. Majority of young widows spend their lives in the upbringing of their children. Therefore, broader understanding of bereavement among such women needs to have an insight into its impact on all the facets of their lives; their personal lives; their family lives and their social lives. The present study aims to understand the experiences of spousal bereavement while they are making adjustments to their lives in their personal and social dimensions.

The paradigm of constructivism was followed to answer the research questions of the present study. In-depth interviews were conducted with eleven participants who had experienced the death of spouses in their families. The time since the death of a family member was in the range of 2 to 5 years with a mean of $M= 3.1$ years. The data from participants was analyzed using thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2013).

Reflecting on the experience of spousal bereavement, three super-ordinate themes; loss from an Individual Perspective, Loss from a Family Perspective and Loss from Social perspective, with following sub-themes: Depression, Devastation, Physical Impact, Deprivation in family, Uncertainty for future of children, Recurrence of Grief in Family, Negative Social Attitude, Excessive and Unwanted Intrusion in Families were identified in the research.

The findings reveal that spousal bereavement has significant consequences for the young women in their personal, familial and social lives. The deep psychological and physical impact of loss in their lives has implications for grief counselors and therapists. The deprivation and uncertainties such women feel in their families needs to be taken into account while providing support services to such women. The implications of loss in their social lives indicate that there is a need to provide social education about the rights of such women and inequalities faced by them in society.

KEYWORDS: young, women, conjugal bereavement, constructivism, interviews, themes, sub-themes, thematic analysis

BACKGROUND

In Indian families, the spouse has immense significance in the lives of women. The death of a spouse at an earlier-than-expected stage of life has the potential to overburden the lives of women with stressors they would never have envisioned for their future. For young Indian women, it is more difficult as they have to experience persistent abuse, discrimination, disinheritance, and destitution in their lives (Dasgupta, 2017; Owen, 2001).

The grief outcomes that have been observed among young widows in the previous studies include anxiety, depression, emptiness, hopelessness, fear, insomnia and a continuous state of exhaustion (Charlton et al., 2001; Kowalski & Bondmass, 2008; Stroebe et al., 2007). The previous studies observe that stressors in the lives of young women are greater than men whenever either lose their spouse and such problems are mostly linked to parenting, managing finance, other legalities, and problems related to changes in their social identities (Chami & Pooley, 2021; Gass-Sternas, 1994; Sevak et al., 2003).

Young widows have to handle stressors in a variety of domains including parenting, work, and in social contexts. They have to manage stressors like raising children, managing finances, and handling unfamiliar life pressures alone and such tasks they never envisioned dealing with them alone (Lowe & McClement, 2011; Worden & Silverman, 1993). The women who are unable to marry



after losing their spouse have to carry out all the activities of their life alone that were previously shared with their spouses. Off-time conjugal bereavement becomes a crisis-based disruption of one's identity as changes in relationships and once-established roles need to be re-evaluated (Moos & Schaefer, 1986). There are usually few similar-aged exemplars surrounding them that provide them with the script to move on in their lives and the necessary support they need to move on in their lives. As such, psychological problems loom large in the lives of such women (Lopata, 2017; Worden & Silverman, 1993).

The additional stressor that has been observed to be associated with widowhood in Indian societies is the negative social attitude towards them. The prevailing culture, traditions, and customs in Indian societies present multiple problems for widows in their social lives. The problems that have been observed to be associated with widowhood among young women include abuse, disinheritance, financial difficulties, social isolation, social shame and being denied legal rights (Dasgupta, 2017; Owen, 2001).

It has been investigated in previous studies that once individuals have adjusted to death, the re-emergence of grief occurs throughout the lifespan of the deceased (Parkes, 1987). The grief responses are triggered at various points in life while making adjustments to new events in life as the individual is unable to share such experiences with the person (Parkes & Prigerson, 2013). Such a subsequent impact of bereavement on psychological health has least been investigated among bereaved women, especially in the Kashmiri context.

In the Kashmiri context, women are mostly economically dependent on their spouses and have to deal with huge economic problems after the death of their spouses. It has been observed that such women do not go for re-marriage and spent their lives mostly in the upbringing of their children (Dabla, 2010).

The broader understanding of bereavement among such women needs to have an insight into its impact on all the facets of their lives; their personal lives; their family lives and their social lives. The present study aims to understand the experiences of spousal bereavement while they are making adjustments to their lives in their personal and social dimensions.

CURRENT STUDY

The research on young widows is far less common than studies on widowhood at old ages. There remains the dearth of bereavement literature targeting the experiences of grief among young widows. It aims at extending the current knowledge on experiences of young widows in the social context of Kashmir. The purpose of the present study is to gain an insight into the stories of loss in the lives of young women experiencing spousal bereavement so that pertinent help can be provided to such individuals. The study needs to answer the following research questions: how do young women experience the loss of their spouse? What are the challenges experienced by them at the personal level, the familial level and the social level?

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews was used to enable a deep exploration into the experience of bereavement. Phenomenology was used as a method of enquiry to elicit and interpret the experiences of individual participants (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

The participants were selected through convenience sampling procedures (through social media posts) and a snowballing strategy. A total of 11 participants participated in the interviews. The age of participants was in the range of 30 to 50 years with mean $M=41.6$ years. Time since the death of spouse was in the range of 2 to 5 years with mean $M=3.1$ years.

The interviews were audio-taped and then transcribed. Field notes and observations were also taken. Huge amount of time was taken to build rapport with participants while taking consent from them and during interview sessions. Confidentiality was maintained in handling information from participants. The names of the participants mentioned in the study are pseudonyms.

The technique of thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2013) was used to identify themes in the data. The steps of analysis included: Familiarization with the data involving transcribing, reading and noting down main ideas in the transcript; Generating codes and collecting data relevant to each code; Generating themes after clustering codes with similar meanings; Reviewing themes and finally Producing the report.

FINDINGS

The feelings of loss and disruption in lives of bereaved individuals are portrayed under the following themes: *Loss from an Individual Perspective, Loss from a Family Perspective, and Loss from social perspective.*

Theme 1: Loss from an Individual Perspective:

Each participant experienced emotional journey after the death of their spouse. They described the emotions of depression, devastation, anxiety and guilt in their lives. They also described the physical impact of loss in their lives. Physical illness was the common physical response among the most participants.



Depression

After experiencing the death of spouse, the participants described that they experience sadness and included both general sadness and clinical depression.

“My life changed a lot after his death. I go along with my social life and carry on all the activities of daily life but there is always a deep sadness, a pain inside of me.”

(Tasleema, 45 years, 3 years since loss)

“His presence in my life was a kind of privilege. I spent a lot and enjoyed everything I wanted. My life returned back to normal but the happiness is lost somewhere.. there is a sadness that prevails throughout”.

(Tehmeena, 35 years, 5 years since loss)

“His illness and all the disruptions in life after his death drove me to depression.. I am taking medicines for my mental health”

(Rafiq, 42 years, 4 years since loss)

“After his death, my mental health got deteriorated. I was taking anti-depressants for almost a year.”

(Shabnum, 40 years, 5 years since loss)

Devastation

The participants described that their lives were devastated following the death of their spouse. Many believed that they never had expected that they would have to face the death of their spouse. It was so early for them to face the death of spouse in their lives.

“I got married to him only after I had passed my 12th grade. My friends who are of my age are enjoying their married lives.. I feel like a huge storm struck me and ended everything in my life.”

(Hina, 35 years, 2 years since loss)

“We lived together for two years only. It was the time of life when I had many dreams and plans for the future life... his death brought devastation in my life... everything ended with him.”

(Tehmeena, 35 years, 5 years since loss)

“He remained ill for a year. I tried everything to make sure that I could spend some more time of my life with him. This tragedy was something which I never thought would happen to me so early in my life.”

(Rafiq, 42 years, 4 years since loss)

Physical impact

Participants described the deterioration in their physical health after experiencing death of their spouse. They described that it was mainly due to the daily stress of managing tasks that were previously shared with their spouse and other stressor in life that befell them after losing their spouses. Some experienced physical illnesses too.

“Earlier, I managed so much of the daily activities in my life without feeling a bit of tiredness but now my health has reduced a lot. The problems and burdens of my daily life made me old.”

(Tasleema, 45 years, 3 years since loss)

“I witnessed a lot after his death. I have to manage my job and take care of my children alone. I have to manage all the responsibilities alone and all such stresses of my daily life has taken toll on my health. The friends of my age look quite younger than me.”

(Tehmeena, 35 years, 5 years since loss)

“A woman who loses her husband at a young age has to face many problems in her life. After his death I don't feel like I am the same person. Many physical ailments have affected me. I am getting treatments for my heart problems and high blood pressure.”

(Shabnum, 40 years, 5 years since loss)

**Theme 2: Loss from a family perspective**

Each participant described the perceptions of loss they had towards their families. They described the deprivation and uncertainty they felt for their families. The recurrence of grief in families is also evident in expressions of most of the participants.

Deprivation in family

There were the feelings of deprivation they felt in the lives of their children in the family. The deprivation was felt despite receiving support from well-wishers and relatives. Some expressed that death brought a loss of protection for their families.

“Everyone cares about us a lot.. my children are loved by their uncles more than they love their own children but the void and deprivation will always remain in our family. No one can take place of a father in the lives of children.”

(Tasleema, 45 years, 3 years since loss)

“Living alone with my children gives a feeling of being protection less. It feels like a shelter less family.”

(Tehmeena, 35 years, 5 years since loss)

“I fulfill all the needs of my children. I provide them with everything they need in their lives. My children still feel the need of father’s support in their lives.”

(Shabnum, 40 years, 5 years since loss)

“After his death, our family became vulnerable to many problems in our lives. It was as if we lost the protective support in our lives.”

(Rafiq, 42 years, 4 years since loss)

Uncertainty for future of children

There were anxieties and uncertainties for the future of their families. Some expressed feelings of inadequacy in upbringing of their children and dealing with stressors in their lives. Some were concerned about the financial security of their children.

“My children are very young to care for themselves. I have to manage the work at office and care for them at home. Had their father been alive, my concerns for their future would have been less. My concerns have increased for them. At times it gets very frustrating for me.”

(Shabnum, 40 years, 5 years since loss)

“It becomes very difficult for a woman to manage all the parenting tasks after the death of her husband. Managing all the parenting jobs alone gets very difficult at times.”

(Tehmeena, 35 years, 5 years since loss)

“My son is still in high school and the elder one passed his high school recently. The financial condition of the family is very low and we are left without the source of income. I am not able to decide whether I should allow my elder son to go for further studies. I am very concerned as they have a lot to achieve yet in their lives without the support of their father.”

(Rafiq, 42 years, 4 years since loss)

Recurrence of grief in family

There were moments in their families when they felt the absence of deceased in their lives. The events in their lives like attaining milestones or achievements in life triggered grief in the families. The absence was also felt at periods of festivities in their life.

“When my daughter passed her matriculate exam, both of us could not resist our tears even though it was the happiest moments of our lives. If he would have been with us, the day would have been different for both of us.”

(Shabnum, 40 years, 5 years since loss)

“The day I celebrated the ear-piercing ceremony of my daughter, both of us were in tears and we hugged each other and cried. Those around us could not hold their tears too.”

(Tasleema, 45 years, 3 years since loss)

“Celebrating the festival of Eid without him takes away the taste of celebration. The celebrations used to be different when he was with us. Both my children and me greatly feel his absence on those days.”

(Hina, 35 years, 2 years since loss)

“Children love to celebrate festivals and important occasions in their lives with their parents. Their behavior has changed a lot since their father’s death which gives me the feeling that they are missing him on such occasions.”

(Tasleema, 45 years, 3 years since loss)



Theme 3: Loss from Social Perspective

Each participant described the experience of loss as they view it from the perspective of society. The participants described the negative attitude they face in their societies. The excessive and unwanted intrusion in their family lives was also described by the participants.

Negative social attitude

They expressed the inequalities they face at the hands of their relatives. Some expressed the restrictions they face in their surroundings about the ways they dress and other activities.

“I was exploited by those whom I trusted a lot. I was given shelter by my close relatives after I left my in-laws house but they drained me of the financial savings without caring about the secure future of my children.”

(Tehmeena, 35 years, 5 years since loss)

“My in-laws conspired against me and I had to leave my in-laws house. My children were denied the inheritance of their father and made us struggle for our sustenance.”

(Tasleema, 45 years, 3 years since loss)

“A woman who is young and faces the death of her husband has to face many problems in the society. Every kind of behavior is questioned in the society. I have to be quite careful the ways I get dressed while coming out of the home.”

(Hina, 35 years, 2 years since loss)

“Even if I have to go to a small distance, I come out wearing a burqa so that no one is able to recognize me. I do not want people to say anything wrong about my character.”

(Shabnum, 40 years, 5 years since loss)

Excessive and unwanted intrusion in families

The participants expressed that intrusion of relatives in their families increased since they suffered the loss. They described that support came from some relatives in the negative way.

“After the death of my husband, I try to keep good relations with all my relatives but I always end up with too much intrusion in my family life.”

(Rafiq, 42 years, 4 years since loss)

“One has to face two kinds of relatives in life, those who really feel your pain and those who are in your relation but never feel the real pain you are suffering from. My in-laws come to visit my family to show their solidarity with us but at the end of the day, they question most of activities and leave no stone unturned to criticize us wrongly.”

(Tasleema, 45 years, 3 years since loss)

“I live with my daughters since the death of their father and we never left each other. Whenever, I have to make important decisions for my children, many relatives come to me with their commands and advise. I have seen them many times making gossips about my family. Without a protective father figure, all the family secrets can come to the street.”

(Shabnum, 40 years, 5 years since loss)

DISCUSSION

Reflecting on the experience of spousal bereavement, three super-ordinate themes; *loss from an Individual Perspective, Loss from a Family Perspective and Loss from Social perspective*, with following sub-themes: *Depression, Devastation, Physical Impact, Deprivation in family, Uncertainty for future of children, Recurrence of Grief in Family, Negative Social Attitude, Excessive and Unwanted Intrusion in Families* were identified in the research.

The participants experienced sadness that prevailed in their lives and some were diagnosed with clinical depression. Such a symptom is often cited in literature as the grief outcome (Charlton et al., 2001; Shuchter & Zisook, 1993; Stroebe et al., 2007) and the current study supports the evidence of such an outcome of grief.

Women at a young age have many dreams and expectations for their future lives. Such women have least envisioned the loss of a spouse and such an event deeply affects their identity. The participants expressed the death of their spouses as bringing devastation into their lives. Such findings are in line with the observations in previous studies on spousal bereavement (Lopata, 2017; Lowe & McClement, 2011).

Women usually experience more stressors than men after losing their spouse. At the young age such stressors are huge as there are increased burdens than losing spouse in the old age. The participants reported physical illnesses and reduced health and such a symptom can be related to the additional stressors alongside their grief that befell them. Such a physical impact of grief is often cited



in the literature (Ball, 1977; Shuchter & Zisook, 1993; Stroebe et al., 2007). This adds to the literature on other age groups where an impact on health is observed.

The loss from the family perspective extends the literature emphasizing the individual perspective of loss. The perceptions of loss that participants had for their families give an insight into the collective feeling or an empathic feeling towards those related to the bereaved. It gives an idea of how and what such women wish for their families. The feeling of deprivation was felt despite receiving the love and care from close ones. The feelings of being protection less and shelter less gives an insight into the fact that women look upon their spouses as protective figures for their families. The finding supports the evidence from the previous studies that observe the protective role played by men in the lives of women in Indian societies. Loss of protection and fear in lives of women losing their spouses has been observed in the previous literature (Dasgupta, 2017; Gill & Singh, 1991; Owen, 2001).

The young women have very little opportunity to prepare for such a loss and there are little exemplars available for them to deal with such a loss in their lives. The feelings of uncertainty in their lives and having anxiety for the future of their children are indicative of such a fact. The concern about the financial security of their children gives an idea that women are still financially dependent upon their spouses in their families. It again supports the evidence that women are vulnerable to financial change and insecurity after the death of their spouses in Indian societies (Mohindra et al., 2012; Sahoo, 2014; Trivedi et al., 2009).

The recurrence or re-emergence of grief in families is indicative of the fact that grief is a continuous process rather than in linear stages. Such a finding extends the literature beyond the linear stages of grief. Such findings on re-grief has been observed in the previous studies (Lowe & McClement, 2011)

The social perspective of loss gives an idea into how such bereaved women are viewed in the society. the findings on the social inequalities and facing restrictions and negative attitude in the society is indicative of the fact that negative social attitude towards women still prevail in our society. it supports the evidence from the previous studies that observe such inequalities in the lives of Indian women (Gill & Singh, 1991; Owen, 2001). The excessive and unwanted intrusion in the lives of such women give an insight into the fact that women are mostly considered inadequate to handle the responsibilities and other social roles. It highlights the negative face of collectivism in the lives of bereaved women. The findings support the evidence from previous studies observing such an attitude towards widows in Indian societies (Chen, 1998; Gill & Singh, 1991; Jensen, 2005).

CONCLUSIONS

The findings reveal that spousal bereavement has significant consequences for the young women in their personal, familial and social lives. There are limited studies that observe the bereavement in young women from all the three dimensions of their lives. The findings on the psychological and physical impact of loss in their lives have implications for grief counselors and therapists. The deprivation and uncertainties such women feel in the lives of their children needs to be taken into account while providing support and services to such bereaved women. There is a need to understand the impact on their social lives and provide the social education about the rights and inequalities faced by such women.

In Kashmiri society where the deaths are more traumatic and in increased numbers among young people, there is a death of services for the bereaved individuals. There is a need to have a separate service for bereaved individuals so that appropriate treatment and counseling is provided to them.

The study was based on the limited number of bereaved women. In order to generalize the findings on the grief outcomes in such women, a large sample of such bereaved population needs to be considered for the future studies.

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