

## BEYOND GRIEF: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF RESILIENCE, IDENTITY, AND SOCIAL DYNAMICS AMONG WIDOWS

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### Abstract

The ritualistic behaviors associated with death encompass actions that signify the significant impact of the loss on both the bereaved individual and the community. When an individual loses a spouse through death, the absence of the deceased has been resulted in the loss of both social interactions and emotional support. This often intensifies the necessity for the development of alternative social relationships. Therefore, the research problem at hand delves to unravel the multifaceted elements of widowhood, focusing on how widows in various socioeconomic circumstances develop and deploy resilient strategies to cope with grief. The general objective of this research is to illuminate the mechanisms through which widows reconstruct their identities amid the complex interplay of societal expectations and personal aspirations. This study is based on purposively selected twenty widow households of Ratmalana DS division, Colombo district, Sri Lanka. The qualitative methods and techniques have been applied to collect data including interviews, case studies, focus group discussions and observation methods. The findings of the research reveal insights into their resilience mechanisms, influenced by cultural and societal factors. Widows face societal stigma and gender-based stereotypes, leading to limited participation in social events. The economic impact on widows is shaped by historical practices like Sinhalese land tenure and discriminatory inheritance laws. Financial challenges arise from shifting family structures and gender disparities in employment. The study highlights varied income sources, with self-employment common post-spousal loss. Financial aid to widows is limited, and government initiatives fluctuate in utility. Support networks play a crucial role in widows' financial stability, offering multifaceted assistance. The research findings suggest that widows encounter distinct difficulties within their gender roles. As the sole caregiver, they strive to maintain their family's socio-cultural and economic stability as household leaders, simultaneously managing household affairs and finances. Widows, identified as individuals who grapple with both financial and emotional support in modern society, face significant challenges in meeting these responsibilities.

**Keywords:** Gender Roles, Identity, Resilience, Social Dynamics, Widows

### Introduction

Widowhood constitutes a consequential life event characterized by the demise of a spouse, signifying a profound and often challenging transition in an individual's life. Within the field

of anthropology, it is regarded as a rite of passage. The term "widowhood" typically denotes the state or position of being a widow or widower, specifically emphasizing the loss of a spouse through death. More precisely, the term

"widow" is employed to depict a woman bereaved of her husband due to death. The encounter with widowhood is frequently emotionally arduous, accompanied by grief and a period of adjustment as the widow grapples with the death of her partner and adapts to independent living. The absence of a life partner upon becoming a widow necessitates both time and emotional support for recovery. Acknowledging the unique challenges faced by widows, societal constructs have evolved to encompass various support systems and norms designed to assist individuals navigating this poignant phase.

### ***Cultural Constructions of Widowhood***

Widowhood is a transformative experience marked by several practical obstacles that transcend beyond emotional suffering. Among these hurdles are the difficult positions of managing finances, domestic chores, and, in certain situations, raising children independently. The loss of a spouse's companionship and psychological assistance makes the adjustment more difficult, resulting in a challenging transformation in an individual's social and emotional landscape. Anthropological research revealed the existence of two unique rituals that enable the continuance of marital alliances following the death of a spouse: sororate and levirate.

Sororate, which is observed in both matrilineal and patrilineal societies, reveals variably depending on the postmarital residency arrangement. In matrilineal societies with matrilocal residences, a widower could choose to continue membership with his wife's kindred by marrying her sister or another female member of her matrilineage (Kottak, 2004). This tradition is not only common among many tribes in India, but it also has historical roots in ancient Sri Lanka. Notably, in tribal India, the father of a deceased daughter may feel culturally obligated to replace the vacuum created by her death in his

son-in-law's home. In Orissa, tribes such as Oran, Lodha, Kolha, Kavar, and Saora engage in such rituals (Dash, 2004, p.56).

Another major anthropological observation is the levirate, a continuation marriage that serves to sustain the connection between descent groups by replacing the deceased husband with a member of his own group. As marriage entails an exchange of rights and obligations, the levirate ensures the wife's family that she would be cared for even after her husband's death. A cultural custom requires a man to marry his brother's widow, providing a safety net for women who might otherwise have difficulty remarrying. The implications of levirate traditions, however, vary with age, according to a study conducted in African tribes, which found that cohabitation between a widow and her new husband is uncommon (Potash, 1986). The existence of both sororate and levirate attests to the societal recognition of marriage as an alliance between two groups, emphasizing communal bonds over individual relationships.

In addition to the previously discussed customs of sororate and levirate, another significant practice is the concept of widow/widower marriage, particularly prevalent among Indian tribes. This type of marriage is often permitted within these tribes, and the dynamics surrounding it are subject to varying practices. The prevailing norm involves the widow or widower marrying the deceased spouse's brother or sister, either from near or distant relations, as per specific tribal customs (Perkins, 2014, p.33). Such marriages are commonplace in India, where the widow or widower may choose to marry either a widower, widow, or bachelor. Notably, among the Garo tribe, the son-in-law of a woman becomes her prospective husband in the event of her widowhood (Vidyarthi & Rai, 1985, p.291). This practice, found not only in India but also in other parts of the world, serves to maintain

property within close kin groups, contributing to the preservation of familial ties. Across tribal societies in India and globally, anthropologists have encountered rules governing the prohibition, preferences, and prescriptions concerning various forms of marriage. Consequently, these customs can be interpreted as additional mechanisms for fortifying social solidarity and expanding cooperative foundations within the societal framework.

In the Sri Lankan context, historical accounts such as the Mahavamsa offer valuable insights into the customs and traditions surrounding widowhood during different periods. These anthropological findings contribute to a nuanced understanding of the diverse practices and cultural variations that shape the experiences of widows in different societies.

### ***Resilience and Coping Strategies***

Cultures across the globe have long recognized and acknowledged the unique challenges faced by widows and widowers, leading to the establishment of diverse support structures, rituals, and traditions aimed at assisting individuals during this challenging period. These cultural responses to widowhood encompass a range of practices, including customs related to grieving, social gatherings with friends, and the formation of support groups designed to provide emotional and practical assistance to widows. The phenomenon of widowhood or widowerhood holds significant cultural and social implications, prompting extensive anthropological investigations into its multifaceted aspects across various societies worldwide.

Anthropological studies have delved into the diverse mourning customs observed by widows across cultural boundaries. For example, Hindu civilizations exhibit ceremonial mourning behaviors, such as the symbolic act of widows

shaving their heads and donning white garments, particularly sarees, as expressions of grief (Chatterjee, 1990). Similarly, in Sri Lanka, widows are often encouraged to wear white attire and refrain from adorning themselves with jewelry or brightly colored clothing, reflecting cultural expectations surrounding mourning. The "*Sathi Pooja*" or "*Sathi Ceremony*," practiced by some South Indian Tamil communities in the past, represents a Hindu ritual wherein a widow seeks spiritual blessings and strength to symbolize her devotion to her departed husband. The term "*Sathi*" refers to a wife, and "*Pooja*" or "*Puja*" denotes a religious ritual, symbolizing a widow's dedication to her late spouse, and, in some historical instances, the sacrifice of her own life. In contrast, among certain indigenous African communities, widows engage in symbolic acts, such as smearing themselves with ash or wearing specific mourning attire, to signify their widowhood (Bourguignon, 1973). These diverse mourning customs underscore the culturally embedded ways in which societies navigate and interpret the experience of widowhood. Anthropological exploration of such rituals and traditions contributes to a richer understanding of the social and cultural dimensions surrounding widowhood across different contexts.

Accordingly, the status of widowhood often carries negative social and financial repercussions, particularly in patriarchal societies, where widows may face prejudice, property disputes, and a decline in social standing. Anthropological research has extensively examined how widows navigate, confront, or accept these challenges (Goode, 1960). Studies in India, for instance, have shed light on the financial vulnerability of widows, particularly in rural areas where they encounter difficulties in sustaining their livelihoods (Agarwal, 1989). The anthropological exploration of widows' experiences encompasses

an examination of the various ways in which they contend with social and economic adversities, contributing to a broader understanding of the intersectionality of widowhood.

Furthermore, anthropologists have researched into the symbolic significance of widowhood ceremonies, recognizing them as rites of passage that mark the transition from a married to a widowed state. In Japan, the "*Mizuko Kuyo*" ceremony, specifically addressing the loss of children, serves as an illustrative example. This ritual is often practiced by mothers who have lost their offspring or husbands, offering a cultural and symbolic means of processing grief and acknowledging life transitions (Brazell, 2002). Anthropological studies of such ceremonies underscore the cultural diversity in coping mechanisms and the profound symbolic meanings attached to widowhood. Moreover, the mention of the "*Wessantara Jataka*" in the context of Sri Lankan death-related rites highlights the intertwining of Buddhist texts and *Jataka* stories with funeral rituals. While the "*Wessantara Jataka*" is just one among many Buddhist texts relevant to Sri Lankan death rituals, its incorporation into funerals emphasizes its significance in conveying moral and ethical principles. By including *Jataka* tales in funeral rites, the aim is to impart valuable moral lessons and provide solace to the bereaved, showcasing the cultural fusion of religious narratives with ceremonial practices. The anthropological lens allows us to dissect these practices, elucidating their cultural significance and shedding light on the multifaceted ways in which societies cope with the complexities of death and widowhood.

### ***Gendered Dimensions***

Widowhood serves as a lens through which broader themes related to gender roles and expectations also can be examined through the study. Anthropological studies have investigated how widowhood can either disrupt or reinforce

prevailing gender norms within different societies. Smith (2004), for instance, has explored the transformations in roles and responsibilities that some African widows undertake following the death of their husbands. The intricate interplay between widowhood and gender expectations is further illuminated through anthropological examinations of kinship networks. Levine's (1977) studies, in particular, have demonstrated the status based roles played by both nuclear and extended family members in assisting widows in navigating the challenges associated with widowhood. This highlights the significance of social support structures in shaping the experiences of widows within various cultural contexts.

In the context of contemporary society, the experiences of widowhood influenced by globalization, urbanization, and changing family structures. These shifts bring both challenges and opportunities for widows as they adapt to new social contexts (Srinivasan, 2005). This evolving landscape underscores the need for further research to address the contemporary dynamics of widowhood in anthropological perspective, considering the limited academic attention these topics have received thus far. Sri Lanka emerges as a compelling field for such research, given the notable increase in female-headed households in the region, rising from 19 percent in the 1990s to 20 percent in 2000. The growth of female-headed households in Sri Lanka can be attributed to political unrest, social conflicts, and the civil war, particularly in the late 1980s. Furthermore, factors such as health issues, including the increasing mortality rate due to non-communicable diseases and the Covid-19 pandemic, have contributed to a notable rise in the number of both widows and widowers. This demographic shift, with a substantial number of young widows assuming the role of household heads, presents an ideal context for studying the

transitional role of widowhood in contemporary Sri Lankan society.

The research problem at hand delves into the intricate interplay between resilience, identity formation, and social dynamics among widows in diverse cultural contexts. While grieving the loss of a spouse is a universal human experience, the negotiation of this emotional terrain is profoundly shaped by cultural, social, and personal factors. This anthropological investigation seeks to unravel the multifaceted elements of widowhood, focusing on how widows in various socioeconomic circumstances develop and deploy resilient strategies to cope with grief. The study aspires to provide a nuanced understanding of the ways in which widows navigate the challenging emotional landscape following spousal loss.

A general objective of this research is to illuminate the mechanisms through which widows reconstruct their identities amid the complex interplay of societal expectations and personal aspirations. It recognizes the dynamic nature of identity formation during the grieving process and aims to capture the diverse strategies employed by widows to redefine themselves within the cultural and social contexts in which they find themselves. As specific objectives, the study intends to recognize the vital role of social dynamics surrounding widows, emphasizing the significance of support networks and community interactions in shaping the post-loss recovery and identity formation process. By delving into the intricate web of relationships and societal expectations, the research seeks to unravel the larger context within which widows rebuild their lives. The anthropological lens employed in this study provides a holistic view, considering not only individual experiences but also the broader cultural and social forces that shape the widowhood. Through this anthropological research, the study strives to offer insights into the rich and diverse experiences of widows,

contributing to a comprehensive understanding of their path beyond mourning. Ultimately, the research aims to inform culturally relevant interventions and support mechanisms, recognizing the importance of context-specific approaches in assisting widows on their journey towards resilience, identity reformation, and social reintegration.

## **Materials and Methods**

### ***Study Area and Sample***

The study intended to investigate the interplay between resilience, identity formation, and social dynamics among widows in various cultural situations. Thus, consider of the study comes under the anthropological subfields of anthropology of gender and psychological anthropology. Colombo, where the fieldwork was based, is Sri Lankan commercial capital and is home for over two million people. The research field is ideal to ensure the sample variation because, from the late nineteenth century Colombo has attracted migrants from all ethno- religious and socio-economic groups seeking employment and access to prestigious schools (Jayewardena, 2000). Ratmalana has been selected by purposive sampling method from Colombo district. Ratmalana is a suburb in Colombo District which consists of major economic zones and indicates socio-economic classes in Sri Lanka. Further, the research area marked high migrated population density which consists with multi ethno-religious groups. Therefore, the researcher has been benefited to identify the big picture of widows in Sri Lankan society. As the sample of the study, twenty households were purposively selected from the Ratmalana Divisional Secretariat division, employing the purposive sampling method. These households are characterized by the distinctive criterion of being headed by widows with one or more children below the age of eighteen. This deliberate selection allows for a focused exploration of the unique circumstances



and experiences within this specific demographic, shedding light on the challenges, coping mechanisms, and socio-economic dynamics prevalent among widowed individuals responsible for the care of underage children.

### ***Methods of Data Collection and Data Analysis***

The qualitative methods and techniques have been applied to collect data including interviews, focus group discussions and observation methods. A semi structured interview schedule has been used to collect systematic information about the socio-demographic status, kinship, educational, religious and social-psychological resources available in study area. Interviews have taken by heads of the household voluntary without monetary reward. Each interview has been taken within 45 minutes by using major local language Sinhala. Additionally, the researcher has conducted in-depth interviews and focus group discussions.

The study has been used an explorative survey design with a content analysis in which only qualitative aspect of sociocultural and individual status of household heads has been investigated. The research was more viable with qualitative approach since it seeks authentic data and emotional responses instead. Because of the flexibility on qualitative approach, the researcher has been permitted to follow-up on any answer that wishes to generate more depth and complexity to the data being collected. Simple statistic approach is preferred in this anthropological research to approaching objective explanation to underlying cause of patterns and meaningful relationships. The quantitative data obtained from this research is analyzed by Microsoft package.

### **Results and Discussion**

Globally, widow headed family settings face numerous difficulties. Based on accumulated work in Ratmalana Divisional Secretariat; Sri

Lanka, the survey of secondary sources as outlined above. The results and discussion categories as follow to fulfill the objectives of the study. They are Resilience mechanisms among widows, identity reconstruction after spousal loss and economic impacts and opportunities faced by the family where the spouse absent due to death.

### ***Resilience Mechanisms and Identity Reconstruction after Spousal Loss***

The exploration of resilience mechanisms among widows in Ratmalana DS Division, Sri Lanka, provides valuable insights into the unique strategies employed by these individuals to navigate the challenges of widowhood. The findings shed light on cultural, social, and personal factors that influence the resilience of widows. As mentioned in the review of secondary sources, in Sri Lankan society, the loss of a spouse results in a diminished social status for widows, subjecting them to social stigma and gender-based stereotypes. Respondents in Ratmalana DS Division consistently highlighted the prevalent misconceptions surrounding widows, particularly in comparison to widowers. According to a respondent, *widows from Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim communities often face blame for their husbands' deaths, becoming perceived as omens or signs of catastrophe within their families and broader society* (RF06, 08.10.2022, 09.30am). In-laws often hold widows responsible for the death of their sons, brothers, or relatives, a perspective sometimes passed on to their children, perpetuating the notion that the widow was culpable for the father's demise. Moreover, widows in Tamil and Sinhalese cultures may hold themselves accountable due to the belief in karma, linking their current predicament to alleged wrongs in a previous life, a concept relevant to both Buddhist and Hindu faiths (Pieris, 2017). The constrained space for mourning among widows is compounded by self-blame and societal humiliation.

Participation in certain social events is restricted for widows in Sri Lankan culture, including weddings, especially those of their children, as well as morning and puberty rituals. Horoscopes consider the death of a husband as an ominous sign, implying potential misfortune for any subsequent husband. The manner and character of the deceased husband further influence the degree of societal stigma. *Widows are often expected to discard traditional marriage markers like wedding jewelry (thali or mangala suthra) and the pottu, a red dot symbolizing marriage* (RF17, 26.10.2022, 01.00pm). However, according to focus group discussion, many widows in the study area continue to wear these markers for societal protection, which can lead to conflicts within communities and even exclusion from support groups for widows. Regardless of visible markers, the entire community remains aware of the widow's status, contributing to the multifaceted social stigma surrounding widowhood.

Conversely, widowers in Sri Lanka also face cultural and social stigma influenced by traditional norms and expectations, although the stigma is generally perceived as less significant than that experienced by widows. This is largely due to the patriarchal nature of Sri Lankan society, which upholds traditional gender roles and expects men to be primary providers and protectors.

### **Economic Impacts and Opportunities**

Through the history, Sinhalese maintain a system of land tenure to avoid the risk which affects to the economy (Caldwell, 1992). Therefore, the Sinhalese system of land tenure has to be discussed by comparing the marriage patterns. Thus, Sinhalese families took various measures to prevent the fragmentation of their own land: one such measure was marriage. The inheritance of parental property by marriage related to three modes of marriage – *Deega*, *Binna* and *Eka Gei*

*Kama* amply demonstrate this situation. In a *Deega*, a daughter of a family joins her husband's family and her issue would retain her husband's family name. Thus she would belong to another family as a result of her marriage. Therefore, she would lose the right to inherit her parental property. The rationale behind this seems to be that if she inherited the property it would fall into another families' possession since in *Deega* it was considered that the bride was given to another family although of the same caste and creed. On this basis in patriarchal Sinhalese society, there were customs and norms which established to secure the future of children and the widow after the death of her husband.

Moreover, although practices related to dowry, property laws, and inheritance laws exhibited variations across Sri Lanka's diverse ethnic groups, they collectively imposed significant limitations on the rights of women (Goody & Tambiah, 1973). The dowry system, in particular, transfers a wife's property to her husband, and in the event of his demise, the property is inherited by their children. However, if no offspring are born, the husband's family becomes the recipient of the property, further perpetuating the denial of land ownership rights for women. These discriminatory practices are further entrenched in Sri Lankan legal frameworks, with the property code favoring male heirs over their female counterparts and prohibiting a woman from cultivating her land if a male successor is available.

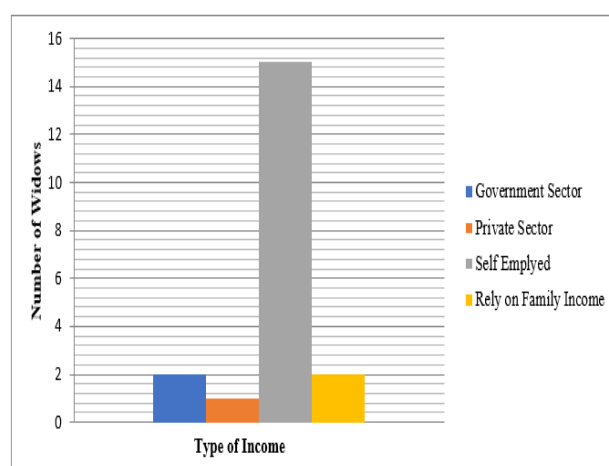
Contrastingly, in marriages following the *Binna* tradition, where the husband resides in the wife's house (Knox, 1981) the distribution of property after the husband's death takes a different course. Without a succession deed, the property is shared between the wife and children, and occasionally, all movable property may belong to the wife. The absence of a male heir to carry on the family name results in the entire property passing to the

wife. However, in cases where the husband dies while the wife is emancipated, she is not entitled to any benefits, even if she had contributed significantly to the husband's wealth and cared for their children. Notably, in certain marital arrangements, such as *Deega* marriages, a widow's right to the marital advantages persists even if she remarries, provided the children are too young to be adequately cared for. These rights are specifically applicable to legally wedded wives and children born to women who not legally married women labeled as *Vaishya* or prostitutes, upon their guardian's demise, are excluded from inheritance rights related to the man's property.

The financial circumstances of widows within the Ratmalana DS Division in Sri Lanka exhibit considerable variation, influenced by diverse factors such as individual situations, social support networks, and resource accessibility. In adherence to the aforementioned social and cultural factors, Sri Lanka traditionally upholds the practice of extended families providing support to their members, including those who have lost their spouses. However, contemporary societal shifts, particularly the preference for neo-local residence among newly married couples, contribute to the rise of nuclear family structures, diminishing the advantageous support widows historically received from extended families. Consequently, in modern society, individuals who have lost their spouses find themselves navigating financial challenges as single parents heading households.

The financial status of widows and widowers is further shaped by their economic standing prior to the death of their spouses. Those with pre-existing financial stability or access to resources better positioned than their economically disadvantaged counterparts.

Figure1: Type of Income of Widows



Source: Sample survey

Notably, the above chart reveals that two widows were employed in the government sector and one widow employed in private sector before their spouses' demise. Additionally, fifteen widows have become self-employed post-spousal loss, facing financial constraints in supporting their children. Only two widows receive financial assistance from their families. These findings underscore the heightened financial challenges faced by women in the role of widows, highlighting gender disparities in employment and income within patriarchal Sri Lankan society. Limited access to education and employment opportunities renders them more susceptible to financial insecurity in the aftermath of spousal loss.

The Sri Lankan government offers various social welfare benefits and initiatives designed to aid widows, encompassing programs like pensions, housing assistance, and diverse forms of financial aid. It is noteworthy, however, that the utility and accessibility of these programs are subject to fluctuations. Moreover, the financial security of widows in Sri Lanka has been significantly influenced by inheritance laws. Despite having legal entitlements to inherit the property or assets of their deceased spouses, the actual enforcement of these rights have exhibit



variability according to the statements of respondents. Additionally, the presence and effectiveness of support networks, such as local community groups, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and religious institutions, play a crucial role in shaping the financial stability of widows. These organizations have the potential to offer multifaceted assistance, spanning financial support, educational opportunities, and vocational training, impacting various aspects of the lives of widows.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the study conducted in the Ratmalana Divisional Secretariat, Sri Lanka, sheds light on the numerous difficulties faced by widow-headed families globally, with a focus on resilience mechanisms, identity reconstruction after spousal loss, and economic impacts and opportunities.

The exploration of resilience mechanisms among widows in Ratmalana DS Division reveals the profound impact of cultural, social, and personal factors on widows' resilience. The findings underscore the societal stigma and gender-based stereotypes faced by widows in Sri Lanka, leading to blame, misconceptions, and limited participation in social events. The study highlights the challenges widows face in navigating societal expectations, mourning constraints, and the perpetuation of stigma, contributing to a multifaceted and complex experience of widowhood.

The economic impacts on widows in Ratmalana DS Division are influenced by historical and cultural factors, particularly in the Sinhalese system of land tenure. The study emphasizes the discriminatory practices embedded in dowry systems, property laws, and inheritance laws, which significantly limit women's rights. Widows face variations in financial circumstances, shaped by social support

networks, resource accessibility, and shifts from extended to nuclear family structures. The financial challenges are exacerbated by gender disparities in employment and income within patriarchal Sri Lankan society.

The study's findings reveal a diverse range of income sources for widows, with a significant number turning to self-employment after spousal loss. However, the challenges persist, with limited financial assistance from families and heightened vulnerability due to restricted access to education and employment opportunities. The Sri Lankan government's welfare programs aim to support widows, yet the utility and accessibility of these initiatives vary. Inheritance laws significantly impact widows' financial security, with enforcement exhibiting variability. The role of support networks, including local community groups, NGOs, and religious institutions, emerges as crucial in shaping the financial stability of widows. These organizations offer multifaceted assistance, encompassing financial support, educational opportunities, and vocational training, addressing various aspects of widows' lives.

In conclusion, the study provides valuable insights into the challenges faced by widow-headed families, emphasizing the need for comprehensive support mechanisms, legal reforms, and societal shifts to alleviate the difficulties experienced by widows in Ratmalana DS Division and globally.

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