

Widowhood and Women Vulnerability: Notes of Narration

C P M Gunawardane

University of Ruhuna, Department of Sociology, Wellamadama, Marata, Sri Lanka

Abstract: *Widowhood is the situation that designates a distinct portion of a person's life that begins with the death of a spouse. The details of each component related to widowhood have an important impact on what each man or woman misses, which aspects of his or her life are most urgent to rebuild or replace as a widow or widower. Experience of being a widow and widower is different based on the social relations attached to them in their own societies. This study was based on the post-war situation of Sri Lanka and the research has studied the widows of fallen security personals of the Tri forces of Sri Lanka. It has examined the research problem of what are the implications of women as a widow and how widowhood makes women vulnerable. The primary data were collected from three Divisional Secretariat Divisions (DSDs) in the Matara District of Sri Lanka. A sample of 14 respondents was selected through purposive sampling method. In-depth interview method employed to gather the primary data of this research. This study was conducted from June to December 2016. As per the findings of the research, the women who became widows of their young age were psychologically disturbed due to the sudden death of their spouse. Losing the father to a child and being a single mother were mainly described as the prime issue of their life. Social isolation was obvious in these widows' life and they were isolated from social relationships due to the social stigma attached to the widowhood. The patriarchal structures prevail in the society influences the women's life though the widowhood and adjusting to widowhood was not easy for the widows of war.*

Keywords: widowhood, narration, women

1. Introduction

There is a clear and distinct shift in the emerging discourse on conflict analysis from the traditional warfare-military contests between nation-states to defend their territorial integrity and independence to the 'new wars' or intra-state conflicts where the state is only one among many other players in a conflict that includes guerrilla groups, ethnically mobilized armies and mercenaries (Behera, 2006). In the period of 1989-98 (Wallenstein & Sollenberg, 1999) 92 out of 108 wars in the globe were domestic wars, with the highest number in Asia, followed by Africa and Europe. Moreover, the changing nature of warfare, especially in internal wars, means that it happens in the middle of human communities rather than battlefields distant from civilian life. The dividing lines between the battle front and home front or rear have increasingly blurred, if not disappeared (Behera, 2006). According to Senanayake, the new wars tend to be increasingly waged in multicultural urban spaces and neighborhoods pit those who once were neighbors of different ethno-religious or linguistic communities against one another (Senanayake, 2006). Further it is argued that there is no abrupt cut off between war and post-war periods as conflicts acquire a cyclical character, the post war period is sometimes better called inter-bellum or a pause before the fighting begin again (Behera, 2006).

The proliferation of armed conflicts, and the high levels of military and civilian casualties, has resulted in a large number of widows in many countries. This has a major issue not only on the women themselves but on the society in general also. Widowhood often changes the social and economic roles of women in the household and community. Moreover it alters the structure of the family and its impact differs according to culture and religion. However, widowhood can affect the physical safety, identity and mobility of women and children. It can also affect their access to basic goods and services necessary for survival,

and their rights to inheritance, land and property, in addition to the wider impact it has on the community. Women whose husbands have disappeared or are missing have many of the same problems as widows but without official recognition of their status. In addition, they have to deal with the psychological effects and insecurity that stem from not knowing their husband's fate, and with direct consequences such as not being able to bury their loved ones and not being able to remarry (ICRC, 1999).

Since women have pre-dominantly not been part of the combat, clearly they had no authority to speak of the dead and dying (Behera, 2006, p. 75). There are different dimensions of the women and war stories which appear in the existing literature. The women who have evolved their own way of coping with conflict situation who have evolved their own way of coping with conflict situations demand that the meanings attached to war be reviewed and revised so that accounts war also reflect gendered experiences (Ibid, 2006, p.76).

The widows of war are common in war torn societies and one harsh reality of the war is that the every soldier killed in war leaves behind grieving relatives. It has been a reality since the Trojan War. The civil war that devastated the country from 1983 to 2009 led to many demographic changes in the war affected populations in Sri Lanka (Silva, 2012, p. 33-54). These demographic imbalances can be attributed to direct and indirect consequences of the long-drawn out war, including death and displacement, injury, repeated population displacement, war induced human migration, early marriages as a means of escaping forced recruitment and large scale troop mobilization during and after the war (Tambaiah, 2004 cited in Silva, 2012). Moreover, the author notes that a distorted sex ratio characterized by an excess of females over males is one such demographic imbalance that has serious implications for human security, vulnerability and psychological stress in the

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war affected communities (Ibid, p.33-54). The discourse on human security has given the scholars' attention on gender and security. It most of the time focuses on how militarization and masculinity influence on women, peace and their role of nurturing as historically, war and combat have represented the higher aspiration of the male members of political, social and cultural elites across time and culture. It most of the time focuses on how militarization and masculinity influence on women, peace and their role of nurturing as historically, war and combat have represented the higher aspiration of the male members of political, social and cultural elites across time and culture. As Dawson (1996) cited in Collins (2007) in ancient Greece, some form of military training was regarded as a prerequisite to manhood. Women in contrast to men have long been regarded as the care takes and nurtures of the young. This polarization is contextualized as (Elsthain, 1987) cited in Collins (2007) 'women are excluded from war talk and men excluded from baby talk'. Thus, it is obvious that there should be noteworthy attention on women in post war/conflict situations. UNSCR 1325 and 1820 mainly discuss the need of ensuring the security of women during war and post war conditions through including women in peace processes and post-war conditions and development.

The women who were left widows as a result of the civil war in Sri Lanka are facing radically altered circumstances. There are estimated thousands of war widows and war-affected family members from the security personals particularly including Tri Forces (Sri Lankan Army, Navy and Air) attached to the Sri Lanka government and they still experience grief reactions. Many widows are in the year 22 to 35 age group and with the death of their husbands; these women have become a psychologically and socially vulnerable group (Jaythunge, 2010). According to Byles et al (2000) as cited in Jayathunge (2010) show the results from their research on "Development of a Depression Scale for Veterans and War Widows" bases on a population selected from older Australian war veterans and war widows as these people had more depression symptoms. Depressive reactions are common among the Sri Lanka war widows. In 2005, 86 Sri Lankan war widows were clinically interviewed based on Beck's depression scale and depression was diagnosed in 23. Ten war widows said that they had contemplated suicide after they lost their husbands (Jaythunge, 2010). Moreover, he has pointed out that the war widows face a number of mental health problems. They have suffered bereavement as a result of the violent deaths of their husbands and these traumatic memories hound them for long years. They are often subjected to extreme forms of discrimination and physical, sexual, and mental abuse. Therefore, widowhood represents a form of "social death" for these women. Their plight and vulnerability lead to numerous psychological ailments. Thus, this paper attempts to identify the implication of widowhood referring to how women become vulnerable as a widow.

2. Methodology

This research was conducted to investigate how women become vulnerable as widows and the widows of Tri Forces of Sri Lanka including Army, Navy and Air forces were taken as the study population. The down south of the country

was selected as the field of study where one District in which sixteen Divisional Secretariat Divisions (DSDs) were chosen. Out of sixteen DSDs, three DSDs were preferred based on the purposive sample in which there were 143 widows of fallen security personals attached to tri forces of the country. 14 widows were chosen as the sample denoting 1/10 sampling policy and cases were picked out using purposive sampling. In-depth interview method employed to gather the primary data of this research. This study was conducted from June to December 2016.

3. Results

The results will be followed by the case studies of the research.

3.1 Being a Single Mother

I was blank when I heard that my husband is no more. I was expecting my second child and it was 7 months already with my pregnancy. I was shocked and I do not know how I survived during that time period till we do the last rituals of the remaining of my husband. When I think of it now, I fell surprised that my second baby was totally healthy when he was born. I think I couldn't eat even during the time of my husband's death announcement (In-depth interview 07, *personal communication* on 10th August 2016).

While I was pregnant my husband could not come to see me since he was put into the battle field and I had to manage of going to clinics with my mother in law or sister in law. But other mothers had come with their husband and I was sad since I could not have that chance. In clinics there are some lessons for fathers to be also. But my husband missed all that and he could not actually cuddle the baby. My baby was only three months when my husband dies (In-depth interview 08, *personal communication* on 10th August 2016).

Believe me, after my marriage we could stay together only for one year and he came home on leave only once and stayed for three days with me. Then he got a call from his camp and he had to return to the work. After that he came to see the baby just after the day my son was born. Then he left and after that his dead body came home (In-depth interview 11, *personal communication* on 12th October 2016).

I was very young when I become a widow and I had two children. The youngest one was just five months and my husband wanted to see how my kids are growing. It is not easy of course to be a widow (In-depth interview no 05, *personal communication* on 12th October, 2016).

3.2 Singleness and Widowhood

How i can think of a marriage again, i have two children and if I marry again that person also wants to have kids. So there will be many differences surely for his kids and these kids. So i already dedicated my life to these children, though my in-laws also asked me to marry again (In-depth interview 01, *personal communication* on 25th October, 2016).

My in laws and parents asked me to marry again if i want but i refused their suggestion as i have my kids who have the

same features of my late husband. So i don't think that a new husband will care these kids as his own kids. So i live for my children after my husband died (In-depth interview 09, *personal communication* on 12th October, 2016).

3.3 Widowhood in a Male-controlled Society

After my husband died my in-laws did not want me to stay there. When my husband was alive, father in-law told us that this house belongs to him as he is the youngest one in the family. But after the death of the husband my in-laws decided to hand over the deeds of the land and house to the elder sister of my husband. My in-laws did not think of my kids even. I finally decided to come to my natal place and bought a land which is near to my natal place. Then, I could build a house with the support of the army camp which was attached to my late husband. My in-laws believed that I'm unlucky and that is why my husband had a mortar attack at the battle field. In a war, there are many who will die due to mortar attack and all the soldiers who were with my husband were reported as dead or missing in action. But my in-laws think that it is my bad luck which killed their son (In-depth interview 04, *personal communication* on 20th October, 2016).

3.4 Psychological Grievances of Widowhood

I feel very sorry about myself when I see loving couples at parents' meetings. I always feel that I never have the chance of being loved from my husband after his death. I myself cry when I recall all the memories we shared when he is alive. It hurts me a lot and sometimes I feel to die but I still think of my kids' future that mine (In-depth interview 07, *personal communication* on 10th August 2016).

3.5 Social Isolation

Since I'm alone, community peeps at my home and check whether I bring men inside or not. So, I often avoided interactions with community members as a way to 'protect' myself from this increased suspicion. (In-depth interview 12, *personal communication* on 12th October 2016).

Within a month of my being widowed, my late husband's family, especially his mother and sister, started telling me that I'm unlucky and bring unfortunate to everyone. They accused me saying that somehow I'm responsible for my husband's death. It was really hurtful. Day in and day out, they pointed the finger at me for his death and continuously harassed me. My mother-in-law and sister-in-law said that they had lost a son and a brother and but I'm lucky enough to receive all the government compensation on behalf of him. Presently we are not on speaking terms, and even I do not allow my children to talk to them. They do not support my child during the hard times and now I have shifted to my natal home and I live at least happily here with my own parents raising these two kids (In-depth Interview 04, *personal communication* on 20th October, 2016).

My husband's family did not support me and they mentally tortured me. My husband was in the Air force and after his death the government provides me his salary and pension as a monetary compensation. So my husband's family thinks

that all the compensation should be received by the mother in-law. But I have given sum amount from the compensation to my mother in law. She says she should receive all. But I have two kids and I renovated this house as a two story after the demise of my husband. It is not easy as they say to live as single lady. So I'm now totally away from the contact with my husband's family and their relatives though they are relative from my natal family side also (In-depth interview 09, *personal communication*, on 12th October, 2016).

I'm suffering from a cancer, I have one son and I still do not know till when I'll survive. If my husband was alive, I do not need to afraid of the future of my son. But now I'm afraid because after the death of my husband, my in laws also stopped talking to me as they think that my bad luck caused for the death of my husband. I do not get any support from husband's side for my treatments. I use only the amount of money I get from the government on behalf my husband's service to the country. So it is not easy though we get a sum of payment from the government to decide all the life events of us. I use the *ranaviru card* sometimes when I go to the treatment at the hospital. Some care some do not. War is over and now people do not care the service of our husbands' for the country. (In-depth interview 13, *personal communication* on 10th August, 2016).

I do not have time to participate for community work or associations as I have to take my daughter to classes. I actually come to the Ranaviru Sansadaya even as it is our duty of coming and discussing the issues of Ranaviru Families (In-depth interview 10, *personal communication* on 12th October, 2016)

I'm not interested in participating to associations as I do not want to travel here and there. I would like to do household work and my goal is to make my children educated, because it was my husband's wish and dream (In-depth Interview 02, *personal communication* on 02nd August, 2016)

3.6 Adjusting to Widowhood

When I heard the news of my husband's demise, I did not want to talk to any. I wanted to be alone and I hate my parents for arranging this marriage for me. I had a boyfriend before I marry my deceased husband. So that I hate all and I did not know what to do with my child. I mourned day and night without talking to any (In-depth Interview No 14, *personal communication* on 21st August 2016).

After my husband's demise, I did not worship Buddha for a year as I stopped believing the religion. While my husband was in the Army I offered flowers and requested from all the gods and goddess to protect my husband in the battlefield. When I lost my husband, I totally collapsed and stopped the contact with the religion. I at least did not look at the shrine room at home. I wanted to stop living (In-depth Interview 10, *personal communication* on 12th October, 2016).

I got the news as my husband is missing in action after he went to the mission. I never wanted to believe it and when my parents asked me to believe the fact that he is no more, I got angry with them. I still do not believe he is dead, but during the early stage of my widowhood I struggled a lot as I

was depressed as I have two kids and the second one was not even one year of old (In-depth Interview 07, *personal communication* on 10th August, 2016).

I started making homemade cake and started selling those as a small scale business after two years of my husband's death. I started earning little by myself so that I can divert my mind from the pain I'm having at least. I started buying new clothes and dress nicely (In-depth interview 03, *personal communication* on 2nd August, 2016).

4. Discussion

The Sri Lankan civil war between the government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) has the dubious honor of being one of the longest-running ethnic conflicts in recent history (Samarasinghe, 2012). The 30-years of this civil war in Sri Lanka between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) and the Sri Lanka government, on the record, ended in May 2009.

Notions of justice and grievances (due to the civil conflict) constitute the moral component of most discourses (regarding the post war situation). Suffering and injustice play a role for Tamils, Sinhalese and Muslims.

Challenging the family composition- separation, widowhood, internally displaced families, disability are some a frequent consequence of armed conflict. This chapter illustrates the social and psychological challenges faced by the military war widows regarding their life course after the demise of the husband who has engaged in ongoing military actions under the guidance of Sri Lankan government during the civil war period of the country.

The loss of a marriage partner creates a sharp break in the surviving spouse's social and personal identity. With this regard, the impact is greater on women than men even in more normal times. Typically, widowhood is associated with the elderly. With improved childbirth care, the death rate among young women has dropped considerably. Because of improved prevention and treatment of infectious diseases, overall death rates have fallen in most Western countries (Silverman, 2004). Nevertheless, modern medicine cannot change the fact that we all will die. On the other hand, in some communities, murder is a daily event. For instance when a country engages in wars it leads to a situation in which soldiers are routinely killed.

Widowhood is the situation that designates a distinct portion of a person's life that begins with the death of a spouse. As Silverman (1986) notes, one important way to characterize the changes associated with widowhood is to consider what is lost when a spouse dies. Companionship, financial issues and what couples did together were all aspects of the marriage relationship. The details of each component have an important impact on what each woman misses, which aspects of her life are most urgent to rebuild or replace as a widow. For instance, the death of a young husband, unexpected and out of turn in the life cycle, destroys widow's expectations about the role of death in her life (Silverman, 2004).

Experiencing being a widow and widower is different based on the gender relationships with reference to the particular societies. Historically, men and women have been socialized to fill very different roles in society. By understanding the ways in which these roles are defined, we can gain insight into the meaning of losing a spouse for both widows and widowers. Women's roles, in particular, have been largely shaped by how the role of wife has been defined over the ages. Taking an historical view on how women's lives have changed, as Lopata (1994) cited in Silverman (2004) divided the lives of women into three periods -the traditional, the transitional, and the modern- which still have some relevance today.

In traditional societies, women married and left their parental homes for those of their husbands. In these societies, first the father and then the husband had authority over a woman. These societies were patriarchal in descent, inheritance, and authority and patrilocal in residence. A woman's only option for establishing her place in society was to marry the man of her father's choosing and become a wife. On marrying, a woman moved in with her husband's family, and the relationships established there governed almost every aspect of her life. When she was widowed, her sons (if any) would take care of her. If her husband died at a young age, the widow's place could be seriously compromised. In some parts of the world, this system still defines a woman's place in her home and in society, as well as the consequences when she is widowed (As Lopata 1996 cited in Silverman, 2004). These women have no economic standing, no vote, and no voice.

The past several hundred years can best be described as a period of transition that was witness to many changes in how the role of wife and women was defined. As societies became more industrialized, families left their clans or extended relatives to move to the city. From an historical perspective, this pattern is relatively recent and still characterizes many communities in the contemporary Western world. In these societies, the power of patriarchal lineage is limited, but the wife is still dependent on her husband to support her and their children and for defining her legal status in society. A man's power to procreate and establish a family was expected and respected, although the man's wife did not have to sever ties with her own nuclear family when she married. Beginning in the eighteenth century, the idea of companionate marriage gained in popularity among middle- and upper-class families, and to some extent the trend to define the roles of husband and wife within this context has continued (As Yalom 2001 cited in Silverman, 2004). Most women at that time defined themselves as housewives and mothers, and those who had careers outside the home probably were very much the exception and often did not marry. Typically, a "working woman" still accepted the idea that her personal status in society would be determined not by her own attributes but rather by the characteristics of the man she married. Her true vocation was that of wife and mother, taking care of others in a male-dominated world. When a married man died in a transitional society, his wife's new role of widow offered her little in terms of status or position in society. She felt empty (As Lopata 1996 cited in Silverman, 2004).

Modern period, a time that coincides with the growth of the women's liberation movement. This movement was dedicated to achieving equity for women in most aspects of their lives and has brought about radical social and political changes over the past 30 years. Each decade has furthered women's quest for equity and opportunity as they have joined the work force, become better educated, and moved away from defining themselves primarily within the roles of mother and homemaker. Women began to reflect on the self-perceptions that had guided their behavior and to realize how much they were influenced by societal assumptions and expectations. In many nuclear families, husbands and wives share work and often exchange responsibilities that once were gender specific (e.g., caring for children). Realities, however, often reflect older values (As Yalom 2001 cited in Silverman, 2004). Even today, women earn less money than men for comparable work. Aspects of the transitional family still remain, and many women still feel they are defined by their marital status rather than by their strengths and capabilities. In certain communities within the United States, women are still expected to defer to their husbands - even with regard to making everyday choices- and the women accept this as appropriate (As Lopata 1996 cited in Silverman, 2004).

Thus, the expectations of marriage, in part, depend on when the partners were born and how they were influenced by the changing times around them. The meaning of a relationship is influenced by the way in which roles are defined, by the expectations partners have of their relationship, and by how they live together, all factors that influence how husbands, wives, and partners will react to a death.

In addition to what Silverman discusses, modern researchers recognize that widowhood is a critical stage in women's lives and that the disruption caused by a husband's death and a widow's need to remarry depends not only on the extent to which her husband was a part of his wife's life but also on the status of "widow" in the community, a social role strictly prescribed by custom. Moreover, as Conger (2009) points out that widows are no longer wives and mothers with clearly defined gender roles within the household but rather fell within several contested sites of socially constructed gender roles. Cultural, legal, communal, and economic ideals ensured that widows would not be allowed to wield absolute power and control generally reserved for men. Moreover, at one time, the relationship of a woman to her husband was defined by law and religion; if he died, his widow was expected to exhibit certain behaviors associated with that role. Changes in women's roles, particularly the role of wife, are especially relevant for how widows cope up with it (Silverman, 2004). However, as heads of households, they were expected to oversee the family and to represent its interests as their husbands had once done (Conger, 2009). Moreover, as Silverman (2004) points out widowed persons often have to develop their own definitions of the new roles they assume; they change in the way they define themselves, in the way they see themselves in relationship to others, and in the way they live their daily lives. For instance, widows become more confident and assertive. Widows often develop a new sense of self that they proudly describe as more independent and self-reliant. Widows often feel empowered to act on their own behalf. Coping with bereavement enables

them to develop a greater sense of competence and to act in ways they could not have considered before the death of the husband (Silverman, 2004).

According to the study of Deborah Kestin van den Hoonaard, as cited in Silverman (2004) they have identified that how widowed is intertwined with the identity of the spouse. According to their study it shows that women have built their social identity with reference to their husband's identity. Moreover, the inevitability of pain following a death, not only for the surviving spouse or partner but also for the many others affected mourners is common with being a widow/widower (Ibid, 2004).

Researches have shown that marital disruption due to death, divorce, or separation increases the loss of support especially in as much as spouses are the primary source for providing emotional and instrumental support and fulfill most needs for intimacy and attachment (Ben-Zur, 2012). The widowhood has been found to be a powerful predictor of loneliness and more so among men than among women (Ibid, p. 25).

5. Conclusion

According to the analysis, it was obvious that the nature of challenges each and every respondent was unique though there were similarities in challenges they face such as single mother, loneliness and adjusting to widowhood.

Being a single mother was mostly challenging socially as well as psychologically for the widows researched in this study. Moreover, the responsibilities of a head of household was experienced differently by the widows as some of the widows had changed their residence to the natal house where the members of the natal house had taken the decision about the family life of the widow when they continue their life ahead. The patriarchal societal relationship had made social as well as psychological consequences in the life of widows when they demise the husband. Some of the widow women were considered as bad luck for the death of the ex-soldiers by the parent in-laws of the widow. Moreover, the natal family had influenced the decisions of some widows researched as widows are considered as vulnerable women after the death of a husband.

The psychological disturbances in widows' life were never ended according to the stories of the widows researched under this study. Not only the memories of the late husband, but also when it is adjustment to the widowhood, the widows had to deal with their own psychological status of being a widow. Being a single mother and rearing children was socially as well as psychologically challenging for most of the widows as majority of widows studied had children during the period of school age.

Thus, the social and psychological consequences of being a military war widow cannot be measured and social and psychological consequences cannot be separated in a line as it overlapped in many cases.

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