

Control of Sexuality and the Widows of HIV / AIDS & Conflict Victim Widows in Imphal West District of Manipur

Dr. Oinam Shantibala Devi

Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Moreh College, Moreh, Manipur, India
Email: shantibalsociology[at]gmail.com

Abstract: *Patriarchal society treats women as subordinate sex, weaker physically and biologically and, therefore to be protected by men. By nature of human atrocity a widow excluded from the normal women and marginalized even in the family by not allowing her to lead in any activity is treated as 'bad luck' in public places and ill-treated for the loss of her husband. Parents-in-law consider them 'bad luck' and humiliate them. They are facing much violence and even beating. As they are regarded a 'bad luck' in the family as well as the society, especially young widows without a child are not allowed to remarry as they carry the stigma of widowhood in the society and their youthful life is filled with restrictions including control of sexual life by imposing dress code and depriving from nutritious food after husband death. Instead, their parents and the community impose upon them performance of certain rituals and offering of prayer time-to-time after husband's death. In ancient Hindu society Sati was practiced and a widow was burnt with her deceased husband. Human beings, born as male and female, are socialized as gendered subjects, i.e., they learn and acquire a socially acceptable gender identity. The patriarchal Indian society recognizes male domination and female subordination. It recognizes different roles for the two sexes. It follows husband's (male's) lineage and vests the whole authority in males. Sexuality of women is controlled by males who restrict a woman's contacts and movement in the society. Right from their childhood, children are socialized in such a way as they are aware of what type of gender roles are expected from them by the society.*

Keywords: Patriarchal society, sexuality, widows

1. Objectives

- i) To study the control of sexuality of the widows;
- ii) To probe into the widows control of sexuality.

2. Methodology

The present study is based on empirical study, focus group discussion with government officials, and Leaders of different communities and Collection and review of literatures of published and unpublished materials regarding the present issues.

3. Introduction

Patriarchal society treats women as subordinate sex, weaker physically and biologically and, therefore to be protected by men. By nature of human atrocity a widow excluded from the normal women and marginalized even in the family by not allowing her to lead in any activity is treated as 'bad luck' in public places and ill-treated for the loss of her husband. Parents-in-law consider them 'bad luck' and humiliate them. It recognizes different roles for the two sexes. It follows husband's (male's) lineage and vests the whole authority in males. Sexuality of women is controlled by males who restrict a woman's contacts and movement in the society. Right from their childhood, children are socialized in such a way as they are aware of what type of gender roles are expected from them by the society. Socialization, religious tradition, sanctions of customs etc. remind them of the expected gender roles. In the early Vedic time, men and women enjoyed equal socio-cultural status and man was considered incomplete without woman. The society considered woman as the

base of all powers, i. e., Shakti. The worship of female deities like Durga, Saraswati, Kali, Lakshmi etc. alludes to the high dignity of women in the ancient Vedic time. Men and women both participated equally in the social, cultural, intellectual and religious activities in the ancient Indian society. Polarization of gender roles took place in the later Vedic period and Post-Vedic period, lowering the status of women in social, religious and political spheres.

In Manipur, specially Meitei society, male dominance is associated with only those men who are illiterate and orthodox. In the early days there was no sexual discrimination abused, humiliated, degraded or violated of their dignity. There was a custom of *Likon Sanaba* (traditional game of Meitei) in which both the mature boy and the mature girl played *Likon* from the sun set to the dawn, sitting together for the entire night. Sexual crimes against women in Manipur mainly started after the exposure of the people to modern movies and recently the coming of mobiles. In the olden days there was informal education like *Thabal Chongba*, a folk dance, in which boys and girls danced hand in hand to the rhythm of music set by the elders. The youngsters responded to the music and song with receptive ideas. But in the present everything has changed (Dhanabir Laishram, 2017). In Manipur the role played by women in the socio-economic and cultural life has been really commendable. The Ima Market (women's market) is the best example, of trade and commerce being completely in the hands of women. Handloom products, handicrafts or agricultural products are, all, dominated by women entrepreneurs. Manipur is a land of culture and sports, and the state boasts of the daughters who have brought laurels at the national and international games. Very different from other parts of

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India, Manipuri women whether urban or rural, contribute economically to the household and the community.

Restrictions

The widows, both, the conflict and HIV victims, are restricted in respect of the food type for one year of mourning after their husband's death. It is found that most (83.33%) of the widows were restricted to consume meat, fish and betel leaves/nuts after husband's death. Of these, 89.74% are the conflict victim widows and 81.08% are HIV/AIDS-victim widows. The remaining (16.67%), 10.26% of the conflict-victim widows and 18.92% of the HIV/AIDS-victim widows, are not restricted in the matter of food.

Dressing

Among the Meiteis and Muslims after husband's death widows are imposed with white or light pink plain cloth allowed, no colourful clothes, up to a period of one year as a mark of mourning for husband's death. In Manipur the dress of women is quite different from other Indian western dress. It consists of a cotton or silk cloth wrapped round the body and a jacket or blouse and a sheet of cloth or chadder-the traditional two pieces. The cotton or silk wrapper on body is called Phaneek. It is of three types. First one is a cloth with stripes of different colours, i. e., red with green stripes, green and black, blue and black and white stripes, yellow and brown, dark blue with green and white stripes etc. The garment has broad margins at the top of the bottom, wherein various geometrical figures or patterns representing the feats in arts and crafts are sewn by hand with floss silk in various colours.

Table A.1: Dress Code for Sexual Control among the Windows (Percentage in Parentheses)

Dress Code for Sexual Control	No. of Conflict-Victim Widows (N=70)	No. of HIV/AIDS-Victim Widows (N=180)	Total (N=250)
White & plain dress	70 (100)	180 (100)	250 (100)
Light pink & plain dress	70 (100)	180 (100)	250 (100)
Black <i>chandan</i> mark (paste of sandalwood) in forehead	53 (75.71)	150 (83.33)	203 (81.20)

Source: Interviews of the Widows Conducted during May – September, 2016.

The table demonstrates that all the widows, conflict-and HIV/AIDS-victims, were imposed with to wear white & plain light pink & plain clothes after husband's death and over two fifths (81.20%) of the widows have been imposed with a black *chandan* mark on forehead after husband's death (comprising over three fifths (75.71%) of the conflict-victims and over four fifths (83.33%) of the HIV/AIDS victims). These widows who used black *chandan* on forehead, all, belong to Meitei community while the rest who are from other communities do not face imposition.

Thus, conflict-and HIV/AIDS-victim widows face dress code imposition by the society as a measure for control of sexuality in their widowhood. The Meitei society believes that a woman is for her husband and is to look attractive for him only. After husband's deaths, the widow should not look attractive and she is expected to live a colourless living tasteless a life.

Body Expressions

Body also expresses sexuality. In every society women are not allowed to expose their body and they cover full bodies, unlike their opposite sex. They are restricted from whistling, talking and laughing with their opposite sex and talking with stranger males, etc. In the Indian society *Purda* system is practiced and women won't be allowed to show their face so as to control their sexuality. In the

study, the widows are found to be restricted in laughing; wearing scanty clothes and staring at/talking to a stranger male and especially in-law.

The data tell that all the widows, conflict-and HIV/AIDS-victims, have to avoid laughing, body exposure wearing scanty clothes and these staring at or talking to male strangers (100%). These restrictions are imposed by the society upon widows because in the Meitei tradition it is believed that avoidance of laughing, body exposure and staring at or talking to stranger is an act of displaying respect towards their heavenly husbands as well as to display the anguish of segregation. Moreover, a widespread belief is that loud laughing; wearing clothes that exposes private body parts and talking to strangers are an act of adultery. Thus, both, the conflict-and HIV/AIDS victims experience restrictions on or avoidance of body expression with a view to control sexuality after their widowhood.

In some societies widows are sometimes even not allowed to express their anxieties. In the study, though the widows are restricted in their body expressions unlike the normal women they are free to express their personal sadness and feelings in the society. They can choose clothes and are free to go to market, choose the vegetables of their like. The distribution of the widows by their responses about personal sadness and feeling is shown in the following table:

A.2: Freedom of expression of Personal Feelings among the Widows (Percentage in Parentheses)

Whether Allowed to Express Freely their Personal Feelings	No. of Conflicts Victim Widows	No. of HIV/AIDS Victim Widows	Total
Yes	40 (51.28)	180 (81.08)	220 (73.33)
No	38 (48.72)	42 (18.92)	80 (26.67)
Total	78 (100)	222 (100)	300 (100)

Source: Interviews of the Widows Conducted during May – September, 2016

The table shows that about three fourths (73.33%) of the widows freely expressed their personal feelings, comprising over half (51.28%) of the conflict victims and over four fifths (81.08%) of the HIV/AIDS victims. The remaining widows (26.67%) do not have such freedom as they are controlled by their in-laws. Such control is less among the HIV/AIDS-victim widows (18.92%) because they are mostly living in rented houses and nuclear families.

Thus, those conflict-and HIV/AIDS-victim widows who can freely express their personal feelings are mostly government employees, having higher educational levels and living in extended families. They have lesser chance of being controlled by their in-laws and parents as well as in the society because of their economic independence, education and family support.

Social Interactions

Social interaction is important for any social system. Without interaction between groups and individuals in society there won't be any social life and individual's personality. It is a basic necessity for individual's development. Though in some closed/traditional societies women are restricted from interacting with their opposite sex or other caste/class people, in Manipur they are free to interact within and outside the family, with the persons of the same gender, caste or class during festivals and social ceremonies. In the study the widows are found to be restricted in their participation in social gatherings like festivals, interaction with the persons specially males other than their own family members and making new friendship circle. Such imposition among the widows is used as means of sexual control by society. The distribution of the widows into the types of restrictions on their social interaction is shown in the following table:

A: 3: Restriction on Social Interaction for Sexual Control among the Widows (Percentage in Parentheses)

Type of Restriction on Social Interaction	No. of Conflict Victim Widows (N=78)	No. of HIV/AIDS Victim Widows (N=222)	Total (300)
Restricted from Participation in Social Gathering/Festival	53 (67.95)	150 (67.57)	203 (67.67)
Restricted interaction with Opposite Sex	70 (89.74)	180 (81.08)	250 (83.33)
Restriction on interactions in Friendship Circle	78 (100)	222 (100)	300 (100)

Source: Interviews of the Widows Conducted during May – September, 2016.

The table shows that all the widows (conflict and HIV/AIDS victims) have been restricted for interaction in friendship circle, followed by restricted interaction with opposite sex (83.33%). They are restricted from social participation in gathering/festival and from interactions in friendship circle on account of the prevailing belief among the people that they carry 'bad luck' with them and any interaction with opposite sex b widows counted as prostitution. This pattern is similar in the conflict-and HIV/AIDS-victim widows.

Remarriage

Remarriage of widows is restricted to maintain husband's (male's) superiority and to control her sexuality in society. In the societies like Manipuri Muslims and tribals remarriage of a widow is acceptable. By an understanding arrived at between the family of her parents in-law and the family of her parents, remarriage is arranged, usually by choosing the deceased husband's brother, in case she wishes to do so and have no child, so as to avoid deviance in the society. However, in the Meitei society remarriage of widow is prohibited. The respondents are distributed into these groups in the following table:

A: 4: Age at the Time of Becoming Widow (Percentage in Parentheses)

Age at the Time of Becoming Widow (in years)	No. of Conflict-Victim Widows	No. of HIV/AIDS-victim Widows	Total
18-22	22 (28.2)	58 (26.1)	80 (26.67)
23-27	41 (52.6)	101 (45.5)	142 (47.33)
28-32	8 (10.3)	33 (14.9)	41 (13.67)
33-37	4 (5.1)	22 (9.9)	26 (8.67)
38-42	3 (3.8)	8 (3.6)	11 (3.66)
Total	78 (100)	222 (100)	300 (100)

Source: Interviews of the Widows Conducted during May-September 2016.

The above table shows that the widowing age ranges from 18 to 42 years. Of the respondents, nearly half (47.33%) became widows at the age of 23-27 years, followed by the age group of 18-22 years (22.67%) and over one tenth (13.67%) widowed at the age of 28-32 years. By and large, a similarity is seen in the two types of the widows.

Thus, most of the respondents (70%) widowed in the age bracket of 18-27 years, the youth age. Hence, the conflict and HIV/AIDS-victim widows are in the age of prime youthhood and procreation. However, they do not express their will for remarriage as such expression is social stigma and also they are controlled by family's/society's restrictions for their participation in social gathering, festivals, friendship, etc.

4. Conclusion

In sum, control of sexuality among the widows is exercised through food restrictions, dress codes, restriction on body expression, and social interactions, prohibition of remarriage etc. The widows are restricted to a particular food type during one year of their mourning for husband's death. They are not allowed to consume meat, fish and betel leaves/nuts because the society believes that these items increase sexual desire and anger which only the normal women need as their husbands are alive and widows are expected to look debilitated so as not to attract males. The widows were imposed with the dress, comprising white or light pink plain clothes, without colours, up to a period of one year as a mark of mourning for husband's death. They wrapped cotton or silk cloth called *Phanek* round the body and a jacket or blouse and a sheet of cloth or chadder-the traditional two pieces. After one year ceremony (Phiroi) they are allowed to use a type of phanek and chadder worn by normal women in the society. Among Meiteis, black Chandan (paste of chandan wood) is imposed to be applied on widow's forehead after husband's death. In terms of body expressions, widows are not allowed to whistling, talking and laughing with their opposite sex and talking with stranger males, etc. They are restricted in wearing scanty clothes and staring at/talking to a stranger male, even to an in-law male, social interaction of widows as limited. They are restricted from participating in social gatherings and festivals, interacting with the persons other than family members especially of males and making any friendship circle. Remarriage of widows is restricted to maintain husband's (male's) superiority and to control her sexuality in society. In the societies like Manipuri Muslims and tribals remarriage of a widow is acceptable. However, in the Meitei society remarriage of widow is prohibited. None of the respondents from the conflict and HIV/AIDS-victim widows remarried.

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