

Listening to half-widows about their life

[A sociological case study of half widow of Rajasthan]

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The history reveals that the women in India did not enjoy an equal status in the society. However, they had been portrayed a higher status in scriptures, they are discriminated at various level, and the gravity of discrimination has varied according to the era and strata. Although the constitution of India guarantees equal right and status to all its citizens without any discrimination on basis of sex, religion, race, caste, creed and socio-economic status etc., women still face lot of problems and when it comes to widows – scenario is much worse. Widows in India face brunt of the society and when it comes to half -widow (women who do not know their husband is dead or alive)-the looming uncertainty and dilemma makes their lives more unbearable. The term Half-widow is given to Kashmiri women whose husband have disappeared and were still missing during the ongoing conflict in Kashmir. These women are called half-widows because they have no ideas whether their husbands are dead or alive. The problem of half-widows is not of Kashmir but there are many half-widows residing in different part India, unheard and unnoticed. The wives of disappeared men or half –widows often face various socio-economic uncertainty. They face many socio-cultural and religious pressure which even makes their lives more miserable. This research paper based on case study method throw light on the life of half widows and also focusses on the problem faced by them.

Keywords- *half-widow, socio-economic uncertainty, socio-cultural pressure.*

Introduction

The status of half society in India had been the matter of great concern as however being portrayed higher in scripture do not enjoys dignifying status. Band of scholars have studied and wrote about the status of women in India but quite a few the issues of widows that too especially of half widows. Half widows not only resides in Kashmir but in the whole country. Half widows is not a new term, they had been residing in the society however unnoticed, unheard and unaddressed. Half widows are the women whose husband have been disappeared or found missing. These women faced numerous problems. In Rajasthan, we have half widows, especially in rural areas. Rajasthan, a desert land with less agricultural productivity practice trade and other skilled and unskilled labor. Rajasthani trader, businessmen, skilled and unskilled often migrate to other states and countries. According to Ministry of External affairs about 7-8 lakhs people go for overseas employment. The cases of missing have been found of the skilled and unskilled labor from India and aboard. The wives of missing men are half widows. However, very few but cases of half widows have been are there in Rajasthan too. The cultural pattern of Rajasthan is subsumed under conventional gender norms and structural inequalities, and in the midst of this, the spouses of the vanished continue to struggle with structural disparities in the psychological, social, economic, and even political spheres In the absence of male members, women were compelled to leave their homes in order to look for gainful employment, where they were subjected to the additional risk of being harassed. They frequently experience additional forms of discrimination and victimization in other aspects of their lives, such as the challenges they face in caring for their children, the difficulties they encounter in

obtaining documents on their name (such as ration cards, for example), and the bias they encounter when attempting to obtain property rights. These women had battled against the injustice and inequality that was prevalent in society, and they continued to do so. Not only had these women been victims of violence at the hands of outsiders, but many of them had also endured intense suffering at the hands of their own family members, such as their in-laws or, in some cases, even the maternal family, who were of no help to them. They are singled out for a variety of forms of abuse, including verbal and physical violence, in addition to threats on their lives and safety. This paper attempts to highlight the problems of half widows on the basis of data collected through case study.

‘Half Widows’: State of Perpetual Limbo

Women are considered to be living with a "half-widow" status when their spouses are reported missing but have not been officially pronounced deceased. Half-widows, as they are referred to, in the present times in Kashmir, are truly victims all over the world, from India to Libya, Chile to Eastern Europe. In Kashmir, they are referred to as "half-widows." However, the problem of half widows is not only of Kashmir but this study reveals that this problem of missing spouses persists but in other parts of the country also, especially in Rajasthan where men go out in search of bread and never returns back. Although some women face more challenges than others, they all have one thing in common: the disappearance of their spouses. Half-widows hold a dangerous situation, one that is one of continual limbo, and endure a variety of economic, social, and emotional concerns as a result of their status as wives of gone individuals Half-widows go through a lot of the same struggles as widows, but their condition is also marked by certain distinctive characteristics. They do not receive formal acknowledgment of their position since there is no proof of death of their husband's, they even do not know if their husbands are dead. They typically fall into poverty and misery as a result of the battle to survive after the unexpected death of the primary earner in the family. Under these conditions, the half-widows are put under increasing amounts of pressure to assume the position of primary breadwinners in their homes.

Throughout the process, people fight with the conflicting demands of their newly acquired positions and duties on the one hand, and their own frailties and shortcomings on the other. The inability to adequately grieve the loss of loved ones and proper funerals adds to the psychological anguish they experience since it prevents them from reaching a point of closure. In the case of half widows they are deprived of the death rites such as proper funerals, which are meant to help individuals or groups come to terms with the passing of a loved one and begin the process of reintegrating themselves into society. On a mental and emotional level, these women are living two lives at the same time; in one, they are doing their best to hold on to the hope that their husbands will return home safely one day, and in the other, they are trying to come to terms with the possibility that their husbands may be dead and will never return. Prior to recently it was believed that these war widows show the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). **However**, most recently, this diagnosis has been debunked, and replaced by the term "ambiguous loss." This term identifies the causes of stress as an external, outside, and ongoing pressure, rather than a previous, disjointed traumatic experience. The term "ambiguous loss" was coined by Pauline Boss, who defined it as "a state of unclear grief arising from not understanding if a loved one is dead or living, absent or Present" (1999). Half-widows have to deal with the additional anguish of seeking for any information on the whereabouts of the men in their lives, a process that may often take years and is sometimes fruitless. In addition, half-widows have the same hardships as non-widows. In absence of proper evidences and testimonies of their husbands' deaths they frequently experience challenges in obtaining benefits such as life insurance and are deprived of the government's welfare scheme. Certain people are in this situation because they have no means of support or education outside of their partner, and some fundamentalist societies

do not allow them to remarry without classifying the new connection as an adulterous one. In this paper attempt have been made to give and insight to the day to day problems faced by half widows and understand the challenges of such individuals in coping up with the hardships associated with their status of half widows especially of Rajasthan on the basis of case study.

The Case Study

Half widows have to bear a wide variety of economic, social, and emotional anxieties as a result of the 'disappearance' of their husbands' spouses, this is the main concern of this research paper. It is important to highlight that the disappearance generally take place in rural region, which were known to have lower rates of economic and social independence for women to begin with. Due to the fact that they do not have spouses, they were therefore monetarily dependent, the majority of the time on their in-laws, and their property and custody rights were ambiguous. In addition, the unpredictability of the form of the absence and the length of time it would last makes women vulnerable to surveillance and monitoring by their society, as well as to threats, extortion, and manipulation by those who were in positions of power outside of their own. In the middle of this socio-economic instability, women struggle with their own emotional traumas while simultaneously juggling the responsibilities of being single moms. A significant number of these women's children also frequently display symptoms of trauma.

The case has been taken from village near Kota in Rajasthan. A 42 years old Brahmin women working as hostel warden in girl's hostel in Kota, residing with three children, one son and two daughters, old in-laws and brother in-law and his wife. Father in- law is a priest of small temple and brother working in a factory. At the time of data collection elder daughter was pursuing graduation, younger was in 10th standard and son was studying in 6th standard in school. Her husband went missing when her son was about five year old. Urmila (name changed) said her husband was a technician, before her marriage her in-laws used to live in a village near Kota but after the birth of her elder daughter they shifted to Kota. She told that initially her husband Mukesh (name changed) used to go out to earn at place nearby Kota but gradually when the expenses of the house increased he started going to other parts of the country like Gujarat, Maharashtra and even abroad to Dubai and Bangladesh. The last time when he left from home, he said he is going to Bangladesh. Initially he used to call on every fifteenth or sixteenth day gradually once in a month after that even the phone call stopped. Her husband gave her the phone number to call in case of emergency but when she called, the number was found out to be non- existing and when police inquired the number was not from Bangladesh. Countless effort were made to find missing husband, meeting police, embassy people and even M.P and M.L.A. of the area but everything went in vain. Urmila has lost all the hope of his returning, now she is more worried about bringing up the children rather than searching husband.

In this paper attempt is made to highlight the problem of half widow.

Social

The primary obstacle that must be overcome by half-widows is to rebuild their lives. Half widows were susceptible to a variety of dangers to their physical and emotional health due to the protracted and indefinite nature of the absence of their spouses, which puts them in a precarious position. Even though social networks have been extremely helpful to the majority of half widows in overcoming the pain they have experienced, the

prejudices of society have occasionally made the situation even more stressful for half widows. As reported by the case it was very difficult for her to face society as many people blamed her for the disappearance. Sometimes, for no apparent reason, half-widows are held responsible for the disappearance of their spouses. Urmila told that she was unlucky for the family, she was also blame for a disaster because of the actions or behaviors that she had been guilty of in the past. She was in dilemma whether to dress as a married women or as widow. She stopped going to any public and even in family occasion, because at several occasions half widows are being accused of trying to attract other men if they continue to dress in the same manner as they did when they were married, leave the house for work or everyday chores, or meet with lawyers or government officials. Even Urmila indicated that she was always accompanied by her brother in law whenever she moved out. In addition to this, she was frequently subjected to suspicion because she was considered to be "without a man." Half widows possess involuntary status as "single women" and the gender prejudices that exist in society, half widows are subject to feelings of social alienation, shame, and physical vulnerability. Moreover, they were frequently subjected to surveillance. Some half widows have being sexually assaulted by those who saw them as weak because they lacked a companion and targeted them for their sexuality.

Economic

Apart from the social stigma and involuntary identity, half widows suffer lot of problem in meeting out the economic needs of her dependents. With the disappearance of the husband the family income also stop, leaving apart the half widows of Kashmir, half widows generally belongs to either lower middle class or poor class that is why their men moved out to earn from their native places. It is a great challenge for the half widows to earn, bringing up the children, looking after the old in-laws along with search of husband as regular phenomena. Urmila while telling her problem, said "I am more worried how to bring up my children rather than thinking where my husband is", further speaking many nights passed awakened in worry what she will do, where she will work as she has never stepped out of the house and above all she is not so educated, what type of work she will do. Previously her brother in law used to bear the expenditure but after his marriage she had to manage all alone. Even her father in law had stop giving food, fruits other thing which people offer in the temple, as he is a priest. Numerous question of future leaves her nights in restlessness. She further mention that as she doesn't have the death certificate of her husband she cannot avail widow pension and other assistance from government welfare scheme.

Children

The initial anguish caused by the absence, as well as the subsequent economic difficulties and social problems, which combine to have long-lasting negative impacts on the lives of half widows, in turn have a significant impact on the children of half widows. These youngsters were either raised under the uncertainty that characterizes the lives of half-widows, or else they spend their formative years apart from their mothers in institutions for orphans or with their grandparents. They are burdened with the social stigma of being 'fatherless' in a society that places a greater emphasis on a child's identity being shaped by their father's name, position, and protection than that of their mother. Because of this, many half-widows lie to their children for years about what happened to their fathers in an effort to shield their children from the social shame associated with being a half-widow. Children frequently have their schooling put on hold after the death or disappearance of their father, which leaves them open to the possibility of being exploited. Children of half widows were frequently expelled from school as a result of the sudden lack of financial resources. Young girls were the first to suffer

because of gender prejudices; their educations are first sacrificed before that of their brothers. That happened more often than not. In addition, because of the state of the economy, some of these youngsters are left no choice but engage in child labor. These children, who lack any kind of support structure, show signs of trauma in a variety of forms, just like their moms did. This trans-generational trauma is frequently ignored as well, particularly in situations in which children take on the role of careers for their moms and/or siblings. When a half widow's mental state leaves her unable to conduct everyday duties and care for her family, it is common for the half widow's oldest kid to take over as the de facto leader of the household. These disrupted childhoods, the social isolation that comes with being 'fatherless,' and the memory of the injustice done to their family all contribute to sentiments of bitterness, loneliness, and anger in the affected individuals. Their children were likewise named and spoken about, but little was done to improve their situation. That was similar to the situation of half-widows. Almost same problems was highlighted by Urmila when she said her children ask numerous question about the disappearance of their father as such queries are often made by their friends' neighbor and even the relatives to her children. She further spoke my elder daughter takes tuitions and also go to put henna for brides and younger one put fall on sarees and small stitching. She said "My father told me to leave my son at his place but my son came back because he cannot stay without me and I can't leave my daughter". Half widows when are isolated from their children, frequently experience additional pain and suffering. Given the tight dynamics that have been described in the in-laws' home, the in-laws may opt to keep and raise their grandkids, while casting out the part widow and not giving visiting privileges. In other situations, the half widow's biological family will only take her in if her children continue to live with their in-laws or are placed in an institution for children without parents. In some scenarios, the children of a half widow were given to the care of the half widow's parents and in-laws, and the half widow may never see some or all of her children again.

Remarriage

Remarrying is a choice made by a very little percentage of half widows. The hope of reuniting with their missing husbands often put them in dilemma to think clearly and go for the possibility of possibility of ever marrying again. (Teresa Crew's article 'The forgotten half-widows of Kashmir's armed conflict' 2016) Even more people decided against remarriage because of their children because of the widespread idea that a stepfather would never embrace his wife's children or do his best for them. And for those who were interested in remarriage, the social stigmas that surround the practice were still rather powerful, and the religious interpretations of the norms that surround the practice were still up for debate. It was more common for cultural norms to prohibit remarriage than for religious ones to do so. Similar thing was reported by Urmila as she said "her age is not marriageable and who will marry her with three children. After three to four years her daughters would be of marriageable age"

Mental Health

Half widows are more likely to have psychological repercussions that aren't properly handled because of the combination of the many different socioeconomic constraints. The majority of half widows experienced anxiety (which was frequently characterized as a feeling of "speeding up" or palpitations), sleep difficulties, and a loss of interest in activities of daily living. The symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) were seen in a significant number of half widows. Anxiety attacks may be brought on by thoughts of the disappearance or of

the missing. Same was reported by Urmila, she said she get panic attacks and many a times she get attack in the hostel, she is afraid that one day she may not lose her job. However, very few half visits physicians for medication or advice. The families continue to cherish hope without realizing that continuing to harbor such hope has taken a toll on their own mental well-being. It is well known that half widows use to self-medicate by using antidepressants, even if these medications were readily available, which might lead to further health problems. As their mental and physical health continues to deteriorate, it has a negative impact on their economic situation. This, in turn, had a domino effect, making their social standing and vulnerability even more precarious, deepening their sense of isolation and prolonging their suffering, all of which further jeopardizes their health and well-being.

Conclusion

Half-widows face grave violations as a result of the disappearances of their husbands. These include harassment during the search processes, sexual violence, rape, and stigma. Despite all of this, half-widows have approached the reparation system and have witnessed further harassment. Half widows were vulnerable to social isolation, shame, and physical danger as a result of their forced status as single women combined with gender stereotyping. They are the target of harassment during administrative or legal proceedings which further augments the pain and difficulties for the Half-widows. The offences committed against the half-widows are either not recognized or unqualified, and most of the time, only a limited understanding of the issue can be found in the positive legislation. Besides these problem they face numerous other problem like upbringing of the children, the numerous mental harassment faced by them and their children and above all a very big question of marriages of their children especially daughters.

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