Old Age Exclusion: A Sociological Study of Widows in Uttar Pradesh

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Abstract - The rise in the proportion of the aged along with dramatic socio-economic changes has posed new challenges for the old aged in general and old aged widows in particular. Since women outnumber man in almost every part of the world, they are more prone to attacks of ageing. Such being the case, women with no husbands encounter additional problems and sufferings. Therefore these widows are triply excluded on account of age, gender and widowhood. The present study attempts to identify the socio-economic condition and social exclusion of aged widow in terms of humiliation and sufferings within their family. The study was carried out in old age homes of Lucknow district in Uttar Pradesh. Under the survey case studies were conducted with the widows in the age group of 60 years and above. The study reveals that the old aged widows are socially, economically and culturally excluded by their own family members.

Key Words: Old Age, Exclusion, Women and Widows

I. Introduction

Throughout the world, societies are ageing. The proportion of the aged in the Indian population has been rising steadily and the gender difference is sharply evident in the old age group, since women outnumber man among the living old age population in India (Bharti 2011). Ageing itself has major socio-economic implications but when ageing is combined with being widowed, another important dimension is added.

The United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2001) contended that India has 33 million (10 per cent of the female population, compared to only 3 per cent of men), the largest recorded number of widows in the world. According to 2001 census, there are 34 million widows in India constituting 6 per cent of the total female population and 52
per cent of the women over the age of 60 years. In other words, more than 50 per cent of aged women in India live without a husband, encounter additional problems and sufferings.

Widowhood is identified as one of the most distressing events among all other events of life (Kumari 2014). It is generally viewed that in a predominantly male dominated societies like India widowhood has always been considered as a social stain. They are viewed as inauspicious and are not permitted to involve in several social and religious rituals (Chandra 2011). Widows are considered to be the marginalized group due to their low social status (Mallick 2008) and economic insecurities. Widows are often evicted from their homes, denounced and physically victimized.

II. Defining Social Exclusion

Social exclusion is an evaluative term which illustrates and interprets an evaluation of both, a situation and a process (Rodgers et al 1995). Within its ambit, it includes an inability to enjoy social rights, feeling of degrading reverence marginalization, and incrimination. It is a “process by which certain collectivity, group or individual experiences denial of access to, social, economic, political, cultural, religious rights, privileges and resources” Kumar (2014, 58). However this leads to a weakening of social bonds or complete collapse of social bonding between the individual and society. In Indian societies social exclusion remains a significant issue since olden times. There are many research on social exclusion in India which are caste based and mainly centered around people of working age group, women, children, etc but how the lives and status of old aged women in general and widows in particular affected by different forms of exclusion has been rarely examined.

III. Conceptualizing Widowhood in India

Societies differ considerably in culture and social systems. The status of a widow varies considerably among the societies. “Widowhood is more than the loss of a husband – it may mean the loss of a separate identity” (UNFPA 1998, 42). In India widowhood is generally described as a definitive and adverse phase in a women’s life, in which her identity is deprived away along with the death of her husband (Mohapatra 2011). Many Hindu women regard widowhood as a punishment given to them by god for the crimes committed in their previous birth. Moreover, widowhood is a life-event that not only denies a support system of a person but at the same time also reduces the size of informal support network (O’Bryant 1988).

According to Chakravarty (2001) in India Widowhood is a state of “social death”. This social death is considered not as a period, in the life cycle of women, but stems from her withdrawal from reproduction and sexuality consequently after the death of her husband and her exclusion from the functioning social system of the family (Mallick 2008). The death of womens husband marked the transition from wife to widow taking the women from central place to periphery; therefore she was regarded as someone who was physically alive but socially dead. Widowhood also implies a shift in position from that of a wife with economic, social and emotional security to that of socially and financially insecure women. However it is an inevitable life event where many aged women are vulnerable to the development of “psycho-social problems” and low self-respect (Mohapatra 2011).
IV. Objectives of the Present Study

There are following three objectives of this study

1. To study the socio-economic background of the old aged widows.

2. To examine the different forms of exclusion experienced by the old aged widows within their family.

3. To find out the factors responsible for social exclusion of the old aged widows.

V. Research Methodology

Qualitative research method has been used to understand the nature and incidence of social exclusion experienced by the old aged widows within their family. The study is based on a number of case studies conducted with the representation of old aged widows, to capture their real life events. The case studies have been analyzed on the basis of narratives given by the old aged widows during the field work. These narratives have been used as a technique to tab the subjective perception of the respondents involved with a view to arrive at concluding remarks. For the study seven cases of sample aged 60 and above were purposively selected from old age homes (OAHs) of Lucknow district in Uttar Pradesh.

Cases Presentation: The following case studies, presented in the subsequent paragraphs are illustration of exclusion experienced by the old aged widows.

Case 1

Mula Devi (name changed) was 72 years old widow, a resident of Gorakhpur, living in an old age home for the last two years. She recalled her earlier days and said:

My husband was an audit officer and held a government job in a sugar mill and I was a house wife. I had one son and one daughter, both married and settled and staying with their respective families. When my children were young we all stayed in a three room house built by my husband. I was very happy and prosperous at that time. My husband was an asthma patient so I shouldered the responsibility of bringing up my children and provided the best of everything to them to the best of my abilities. My children were intelligent so they achieved success very early in life. My daughter got married and went to Germany with her husband. After my daughter marriage, suddenly my husband felt too ill and died of asthma attack. That time I was very shocked and had a poor health then I thought of to make marriage of my son. Finally my son also got married in a respectable family known to us. I was very caring and considerate towards my daughter-in-law. Before marriage my son was very close to me but after marriage, within six months, his relation with me was changed enough. Petty quarrels started on issues like my habit of rising early morning, bathing and sitting for prayer which my daughter-in-law did not like at all as it disturbed her sleep. I have maintained a close relationship with my daughter and I started consulting her on various family matters. But my son disliked all this and the relationship between both of us became strained. One fine evening my son came to me and began pressing me to transfer the whole property to his name and said that now you were old enough to handle the home affairs, so give all the responsibilities in my hand. I would manage all the things accordingly. Without realizing the implication, I sign on property related papers. After all this my situation became worse. My daughter-in-law even
disliked my presence and started insulting us. They had given me a separate room where I was left alone in a bad state of health, facing isolation due to stained relation within the family. All this disturbed me a lot and I decided to stay in old age home where I could get care from others. Initially I thought that my son would respect me and would take care of me in old age, but I was wrong to think that way. It is shameful to state that he treated me like an enemy.

This case illustrates that the strained relationships and conflict from the children side not only create adjustment problems but also break the social bonding between the parents and children. Moreover the breaking of social bonds forced the old aged widows to live in social and emotional isolation thus leads to social exclusion of the old aged widow.

Case 2

Sheela Ranjan (name changed) a 77 years old widow, staying in this old age home since four years expressed her sorrow:

I have two sons and both of them are married and well settled. Elder son is an engineer and younger son is an assistant professor. My husband was an engineer but he died in 2005. I was completely depressed and shocked after the death of my husband. After his death I had gone to Gwalior to stay with my younger son but within few months my daughter-in-law started shouting and ill-treating me. Once when I asked for lunch from my daughter-in-law, she shouted at me and said that you are not a little kid. It is not my responsibility to give you everything on time. You have your own money then why can’t you have your lunch or dinner somewhere else. With her my sons also started neglecting me. Even they denied to give food to me and never asked for any of my needs and problems. Don’t I have any feelings or emotions to share? I am fed-up of my life. What is the use of this life.......sitting all alone? Due to their abuse and misbehavior my old age has become hell for me. I am very discouraged, disheartened with disobedient behavior of y two sons. What is the use of keeping any kind of relationship with children when they do not even like to listen to our voices? After so many bad incidences how could I be satisfied in my interpersonal relationship with the children?

The above case shows that the widows experienced torture and inhumane treatment by their own family members. They were misbehaved and maltreated by their own son that leads to deteriorating interpretational relationships and loss of social ties. This in turn placed these old aged widows to depressed and socially excluded position in the family.

Case 3

Mrs Murti Jaiswal (name changed) was 72 years old widow, had been an innate of old age home since eight years. She narrated that:

My husband was a petty businessman. I have two daughters and one son who were well educated. My son worked as a constable in railway police, got married and settled. Both of my daughters also got married in a middle class family after completing her education. But due to some health problem, after giving birth to a second baby, my elder daughter fell ill and died. Unfortunately one day in a major heart attack, I lost my husband also. Since then I have lost all my happiness and have to work hard to earn some money. I am economically independent and used to contribute in my family income by selling green vegetables and fruits in a local market. But now since last two-three year I had been suffering from arthritis pain due to which I unable to earn for myself and had to depend on my sons family. Being completely dependent and unable to supplement in the family income I have to face frequent verbal and physical abuse by my son and daughter-in-law. Most of the time they compelled me to leave the home and take refuge somewhere else. After few days they accommodated me in a distant room, outside the compact house and even refused to give me two square meals a day. They restrict me to mix around with
my grand children and other neighbors living nearby. Mostly I felt lonely and used to cry. One day due to exertion I felt seriously ill and at the same time my son forcibly send me to my younger daughter house, with the instruction that she must not be sent back again.

The above narratives reflect that after the death of husband women had to face number of problems such as decline of status within the family, lack of recognition and abuse by the children. In the latter stage of life the most of the widows have been subjected to many hardships like physical and economic dependency on their children which is the cause of an unhealthy relationship among them and force the old aged widows to be socially excluded.

Case 4

Sital Gaur (name changed) was 79 years old widow. She narrated her story in the following words:

I have two sons and one daughter. All are married and settled. Ten years ago, I and my husband were staying alone, far from our children. My husband was a retired pensioner from the Railways. He was very caring towards me and we both lived happily. Earlier when I was staying away with my husband my children respect me a lot as I had all the economic power in my hands and I give them money whenever they asked. But after the death of my husband I was all alone and became financially and physically weak. So my younger son and daughter-in-law called me to stay in their house with them. I am an ill old woman and require regular medicines and regular checkups. After some time my son got fed-up of my health condition and started avoiding me every now and then. All finances were controlled by my son. He took away all money from my account. At the starting of the month my son himself filled the withdrawal slip and put his signature for the pension payment on my behalf. In this way he even took out the entire monthly pension amount from my account. Whenever I ask him for money he ignores me and usually says “now it is time for you to sit at home and worship God, now you need no money”. Now I am extremely weak and suffering from ailing health. God should not keep a man alive after 60 years.

This case shows the economic exclusion of the widow in her own family. Children in this case does not give any physical or verbal abuse but economically exclude the old aged widow by taking away all her money and ignore her at the time of need.

Case 5

Another lady Munni Prajapati (name changed) was a 64 year old widow, stated:

I had a small family of five members consisting of my husband, my three children and myself. My husband was an engineer but I only know how to read and write. I had no formal education. My two daughters and son are well educated and well settled. My husband has divided his property into three equal shares, one for son, one for himself and one for me. Both of my daughters are also married. We had two to three plots and a house in Jhansi, but after the death of my husband, my son sold all the three plots without any information. He also took out a huge amount of money from the joint account. When I came to know about this entire process I informed my daughters and sons-in-law and asked them to help but when they tried to intervene, it would lead to fight and my son started quarrelling with me. Further he also demanded to transfer all money and house to his name. I did not succumb to his demands due to which frequent quarrels resulted into physical violence against me. One night I and my son had an argument on property issues and on this my son threw me down the stairs. I got injured and kept on crying in pain for the whole night. Next day when my daughters came, they took me to hospital. When I recovered, I shifted to a house near to my daughter’s. My son visits me and quite often threatens me and abuses me verbally. She further remarked: What’s the use of having sons if they do not take care of their parents in old age? It is better to have no son. As sons start taking care of their own family, they often leave their parents alone.
In this changing society, children forget their obligations to their parents. Now the interpersonal relationships were no more based on love, closeness and care. Rather there is an emergence of contractual and formal relationships. Sons looked after their elder parents not out of a sense of respect and care but out of a self motive to get control of their property/money. As soon as they get it, they start reacting in different manner.

This case clearly shows the negative and selfish attitude of the young children towards the old aged widow. Being widow and aged these women easily become the victims of economic exclusion by their children. Children compelled them to give up all their economic assets and savings, thus exclude them economically as well as socially.

Case 6

Sabita Chauhan (name changed) was 66 years old widow, staying in an old age home commented:

Once I was a rich woman. My husband was a business man and we had a lot of wealth and money. I had no child so I adopted my cousin brother’s daughter as my child. I and my husband gave her a lot of love and affection. We provided her each and every facility she required. We educated her and brought her up with lots of care and love. Now she is working in a private company. Few years back she got married and was staying with me only because my husband died in an accident and nobody was there to take care of me. But gradually my adopted daughter and her husband occupied my entire house and property which my husband had built with hard earned money. My adopted daughter and her husband had kidnapped me in my own house where I could not see even sunlight for three months just because they wanted my signature on the transfer papers of my property. Finally I had to sign the papers and transfer all my property to their name. After this they left me here in this old age home. Further when I asked her the reasons for not filing a case against them, she remarked: Now I don’t want to indulge myself in any of the court cases, as without money nothing can be done, the court will also not listen to me. I am not in a condition to have faith and trust on any one, neither court nor family members. Again this is a case of economic exclusion. Due to materialistic and individualistic outlook the children had become so disobedient that they not even commanded a respect to the old aged widow who had bring them up. Just to make them self financially sound the children economically exclude their own old aged widow mother.

Case 7

There was another respondent named Sheena Begum (name changed) who was 62 years old widow, staying in old homes since two years, expressed her sorrow:

My husband was a primary school teacher in a government school. I had three sons and a daughter. Sometime after my marriage, I and my husband started staying with my husband’s elder brother whose wife died of stomach cancer when his son was 5 years old. Then I brought this child up and never made him feel the absence of his mother. I had a very happy life till my husband died at the age of 53. Some years after my husband’s death I married my daughter to a software engineer. My daughter went away to settle in West Bengal. My two sons had a petty business and they used to give me a lot of care and respect. But, unfortunately, both of my sons died in an accident. Since then I am staying in a joint family with my nephew and my third son. After my husband death and son’s death my family members started treating me like a witch. My brother-in-law usually blamed me for their death. I not only had to remain confined to the four walls of the house but also had to perform all the cooking, cleaning and washing. I was not allowed to sit with everyone for the lunch or dinner. They gave me a selected food which I used to eat while sitting in one corner of the room. They did not allow me to visit anywhere.
Whenever I feel like sitting outside and try to interact with any of the neighbors. My younger son and brother-in-law scold me and argue that “you are a widow, not suppose to go out frequently”. They also did not allow me to involve in any of the religious or social ceremonies. I am restricted to attend any of the festival events in our society. Moreover she contended that I was fond of to work outside and be an independent but due all these reasons it could never happens and one fine day somehow I leave my house and come to stay here in this old age home.

The above narrative reflects the cultural exclusion of an old aged widow. It is due to patriarchal system and social custom that these old aged widows are generally subjugated by men in their own house, have restricted movement which curtails their outside visits and exclude them from cultural exercise.

VI. Conclusion

These case studies give the glimpse of exclusion experienced by the old aged widows in Indian society. The above cases suggest that the old aged widows were facing social, economic and cultural exclusion. They were insulted, humiliated and also denied of food and emotional support by their children in the family. It is more noticeable in the case of those who are dependent on their children for economic support, having nothing to contribute in the family either physically or financially. Moreover the lives of these old aged widows were governed by traditional social and cultural taboos that did not allow them to avail opportunities in life, consequently exacerbate their level of exclusion. Hence it can be inferred widows are excluded in multiple spheres of life, attributable to gender and old aged.

VII. Suggestions

1. Community policing programs should be expended to address the different aspects of exclusion such as abandoned, abuse and neglect by the family members.

2. Time to time the, programs should be organized by the Non Government Organizations (NGOs) or civil society members to create awareness and networking among the old aged widows so that they have an environment to protect themselves from different forms of exclusion.

3. The adult children need to be sensitized to the problems and feelings of the old aged widows. They must spend some time with them instead of neglecting them as non living things. This will not only strengthen their interpersonal relations but also help the old aged widows to overcome social exclusion.

VIII. References


