

TILL DEATH DO US PART**Jessy Crasto Coutinho**

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ABSTRACT

This paper will present the peculiar and unique problems associated with young widowhood. It focuses on young widows belonging to the Roman Catholic Community of South Goa. It will also explain bereavement and grief associated with it and how these women cope with the unexpected and untimely death of their spouse. Widowhood leads to a shift in Identity from 'wife' to 'widow' and 'single' again. This paper makes an attempt through case studies on how these women navigate through this journey and what measures are taken to reconstruct their identity.

Keywords: young widow, Bereavement, Identity, Identity reconstruction

Introduction

The phrase 'Till Death do us part' is a common phrase used in Christian wedding ceremonies. It indicates that the marriage bond is intended to last until death. Taken from the marriage liturgy in the Anglican Communion's Book of Common Prayer the phrase refers to the fact that marriage is seen in the Christian faith as insoluble except by the death of the partner.

Death is inevitable and brings changes to the survivors in different forms. Death of a husband is different from death of a spouse and so on. The focus of this paper will be on unexpected and untimely demise of the husband specially when the wife is younger that is 25 to 45 years. This is an age when couples build their lives together, bringing up children and look for sometimes retiring together or growing old together. Hence death is not an expected event.

In India, a predominantly patriarchal society, loss of a husband brings many drastic and sudden changes in the social and economic status in the life of the wife. The position of widows in many societies has been precarious because the death of a husband removes the main source of their economic wellbeing. Marriage leads to intertwining of identities of husband and wife. The personal self-identity of widows is largely influenced by the husbands' status and her role revolves around home and hearth. Thus, the mind set of society views her largely only in relation to her identity vis-a-vis the males around her. This perception has not changed. However, to add to this when a woman becomes a widow in her 20's or 30's she assumes a role she is not prepared for (Di Giulio, 1992:86). Hence the death of the

husband almost marks the social death of the wife.

This is more complicated and difficult specially for young widows as they are not prepared for this non-normative or unexpected life event. Young widows grieve both the loss of a partner and the death of her dreams. They also grieve for the loss of their identity as a married individual, the loss of her goals, and future aspirations that were jointly held with the deceased (e.g., raising children, growing old together, or retiring together). Accompanying these losses can be the challenges of single parenthood, the need for career, financial and lifestyle changes (Assisters, 1994; Mc Ewen & Stellar, 1993).

Insecurity among the widowed women induced by the death of life partner brings many changes in their behaviour and personality. They are also pressurised to observe restrictive code of dress and behaviour. Widows have some normative restrictions placed on them by society. The most common, natural and socially desired behaviour expected of them is religiosity and ritualism (Barik 2009: 28).

Furthermore, young widowhood is commonly associated with little opportunity to prepare, fewer or no 'role model' to handle the changes in the variety of domains including work, sociality, and parenting (Parkes, 1975:69). These differences are further compounded when the timing of death (anticipated versus sudden death) and length of widowhood are considered.

Objectives

1. To examine the peculiar issues as well as problems involved in early widowhood

2. To provide insights in to the day-to-day life of a widows
3. To find out coping strategies adopted by these young widows to reconstruct their identity

Research Methodology

The south Goa district of Goa was selected based upon the religious census 2011 which states a high catholic population in South Goas that is 36 percent as compared to North Goa that is 16.05 percent.

Further based on the predominance of catholic population, four out of the six talukas of this district were selected. They are Salcete, Sanguem, Quepem and Mormugaotaluka. Salcete talukas has the highest catholic population 55.55 % Census 2011.

A topic on spousal death necessitates clarification of certain concepts which form the basis of the widow's life such as the term widowhood, bereavement, and identity.

a) Widowhood

The social status of widows has been an important social issue in the past as well as in the present. The term 'widower' is used to refer to a man whose wife has died; whereas the term 'widow' is used to refer to woman who has lost her husband. The state of a woman having lost one's husband to death is termed as 'widowhood' (Barik, 2009:17). Thus, widowhood is a change in the position of woman brought about by the death of a husband in a marital relationship.

b) Bereavement

The terms bereavement and grief are often used interchangeably in practice, but for the intent of this study, there will be a differentiation between the two. Bereavement is defined as "an objective state of having experienced a loss" (Marwit, 1991, p. 76). Bereavement is a period of time in which a person may be expected to experience negative effect or a depressed state as a result of having experienced a loss. Bereavement means "the state of being deprived" (Attig 2001). When a loved one dies the surviving spouse is deprived of the person she loves. Grief in contrast to bereavement, is "the nature of the physiological and psychological reaction to that loss" (Marwit, 1991: 76). Grief, a highly

subjective condition, is characterized by disruptions in cognitive, emotional, physical, and interpersonal functioning.

Loneliness is one of the greatest difficulties of young widowhood, which she faces. Even if a young widow has supportive friends and family, they are not a substitute for the emotional intimacy and daily interaction she experienced with her spouse (DiGiulio, 1992:81). At the end of the day, it is the spouse that young widows look for to process the day's events or to share insignificant titbits or to be hugged.

e) Identity

Identity is the product of an individual's inherent quest to make sense of his or her place in society. Erikson (1959, 1994) describes identity formation as a process that begins as soon as an individual is born. He explains personal identity as the way an individual organizes his or her experiences within an environment in relation to one's sense of self (Erikson 1959, 1994). Moreover, one's personal identity is depicted as a core sense of self defined through the personal meaning, traits, and characteristics one exercises and associates with an experience or membership to a group (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009).

However, for an individual's personal identity to have meaning, it must be applied to a social context which he/she has experienced (Deaux, 1993; Erikson, 1959; 1994; Frey & Tropp, 2006; Hutchison & Rea, 2011; Torres et al., 2009). Once formed, identity is maintained, modified, or even reconstructed through the individual's experiences in various social contexts throughout his or her life context (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Deaux, 1993).

As per the primary data collected through an in-depth interview schedule the following are some of case studies of widowed women who have reconstructed their identity post loss of their spouse and also those who are in the transition period.

Case study 1

Aged 40 years, Sabina (name Changed) from Sanguem Taluka was widowed at the age of 36 years. She is presently employed by the church to collect parking fees towards tourists' taxis and vehicles that are using church parking area to proceed to a waterfall situated 2kms

from the church. she is paid Rs. 300 per day duty hours are from 8 am in the morning to 6.30 in the evening. Earlier she worked as fruit vendor at Dudhsagar waterfall and had also worked as domestic help.

A mother of three children, 2 boys and a differently abled daughter. She has a smile and calmness on her face. After completing HSSC she got married at the age of 20 years through love marriage. She was married for 16 years to a man who was in Goa Police. The initial years of her marriage were normal. He would take up responsibilities of bringing in groceries and also giving sufficient money to her for other expenses. His salary was above 1 lac per annum. However after 12 years of marriage she came to know he had an illicit relationship with a woman near his workplace. Their son brought home this news and she also had some idea. A detailed study proved it correct. He was visiting a prostitute at a red-light area and gradually they fell in love. Sabina visited that woman and confronted her. With lot of efforts, she made him leave the house and all shifted to a place which was 55kms away from their home but he continued to work in the same place. He did shift but took up drinking and abusing and beating his wife and children. He would stay absent from work on many occasions and hence was suspended from the job. He developed health problems, amidst all that she gave birth to their third child - a daughter who was born disabled.

As far as finances are concerned, she narrated that she gets a pension of 17000 per month and upon his death each family member they got one lac each.

Today her elder son works on cruise ship, younger one is in school and daughter being disabled is at home but does all the household work. Sabina still misses her husband she narrated her experience of being widowed and how some practices are discriminatory to widows. For e.g., after her widowhood, her neighbours right opposite her house as usual pruned all the plants in the garden except one and she was told it was done so that they can avoid her sight in the morning as they believed that a widow was an evil sight. On another occasion at a wedding, she was not allowed to extract coconut juice as it is believed that it

would be used for a bride and hence any bad luck should not cast on her.

Today she looks forward to getting her son married and feels sad as her daughter is still dependent. She advises young widows to turn to God for courage and if possible, they should remarry. She is not worried much of economic security but believes her husband still watches and protects them. She has no plans to remarry and says she still wants to be identified as his wife irrespective of the difficulty she faced on account of his hurtful and erratic behaviour.

Presently she lives in her mother's home which is given to her as she has no brothers and one sister is married off. What was surprising is that her husband's sister was her biggest support all through out and even till date.

Case study 2

Overnight, I lost the fullness we experienced by combining our lives. I was single, alone, and part of my identity — being his wife — had vanished. Our apartment felt empty. I couldn't imagine my future, now that I faced it without him. My grief and heartbreak were physically painful and disorienting. It took months to return to sleeping through the night, even longer to make it through a day without hovering on the verge of tears. I hurt from loneliness — longing for someone I couldn't have — and aching to be held and comforted by another body.

Each morning felt like a marathon. How could I go on without him, yet again?

These were words from Bernadette, a young woman widowed at age 23 with a child of one year 9 months, at the time of her husband's death. Her husband had gone out on the eve of Christmas night to bring in some decoration and never returned. Early morning a call from police woke them up his body was found along with his bike on roadside bushes. The accident he was involved in is a mystery. He was drawing his income from his joint family business. After his death she had no separate savings, the house was a joint property, the mother-in-law looked after household expenses. She was supported by her parents and also by her brother who was working abroad in Dubai at that time. After roughly two years of working in private sector jobs in Goa, learning new skills like tailoring and hairdressing she

finally decided to go abroad .She left for a job abroad leaving her daughter of four years with her parents. After working in the gulf for 10 years she finally took her daughter there to complete her remaining education ie.12th standard. Today her daughter is pursuing MBA in Poland. Bernadette never remarried .Other than her job she has taken up singing as her hobby and actively participates in creating her own videos on social media. She prefers to be known as a single independent and proud mother.

Case study 3

Rosy Dias(name changed) is a 36 years old Roman catholic widow who resides locally in Quepem Taluka of south Goa . She is presently unemployed and depends on family support (sister) for raising her two dependent children between the ages of twelve and fourteen. she and her husband were married for 15 years .It was an arranged marriage . The couple had their own house and lived there with their children . Her husband was working abroad on the passenger cruise line, (an occupation common among Goan men) at the time of his death. His death was caused by sickness caused to excessive alcohol consumption .It lasted for almost three months before he eventually passed away. At the time of her participation in the study, she had been widowed for three years. she is struggling to keep the family going. Her sister and brother-in law who work abroad send her monthly remittances. For a year she was employed in a church run pre-primary school but due to covid 19 the school closed down. Her daughter was studying in x std and she was struggling to

arrange money for her tuition fees as well look after all other household expenses

Her husband was an alcoholic ,every time he came down to Goa after a span of 9 months, he would spend his large amount of his savings on drinks and partying with friends. The alcohol took a toll on his health ,his liver failed and for his treatment she had to sell her gold and borrow money from relatives.

Today she is hoping for a job as she is a graduate, she also hopes to see her children finishing education .she is hopeful of a bright future for herself and children she does not wish to remarry as she believes that marriage is only once.

Conclusion

The above three cases varied in their own ways.The three cases presented above have three age groups of women being widowed. While one was widowed at the age of 24 years after three years of marriage and one child, the other two had long duration of married life 15 years and 16 years respectively. In all three cases they had dependent children .while two women married through love marriage ,one of them had an arranged marriage. All three were educated and took up employment only after the death of their husband. Two have reconstructed their identity and are feeling they are coping well while one is struggling. The sudden change in marital status leads to change in a person future aspiration. The struggle is real. The pain and grief are eternal. Amidst such challenges the three women show courage and make a life for themselves and their children.

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