

# We Lost Our Loved Ones Too Early: Untold Experiences of Elderly Widows

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## **Abstract**

This article explores the journey of elderly widows who lost their husbands in their younger age; by scouting their perceptions, roles, responsibilities and the experiences within individual, familial and societal structure. Sixteen elderly widows were interviewed in Sivasagar district of Assam by using purposive sampling methods. Four themes were extracted from the study viz., ‘Influence of family over grief (support and negligence)’, ‘Suffering alone (struggle and commitment)’, ‘Restored self-esteem and self-confidence’ and ‘Later life (blend of positivity and negativity)’. Widows in their younger age get to grips with social disgrace and restrictions in occupation, social and community activities. Fear and precariousness struck at the initial period; yet, with passing time, these women resumed their roles in their households with confidence.

**Keywords:** Elderly widows, Bereavement, Self-esteem

## **Introduction**

Listening to the life-experiences of the elderly; be it sweet or sour, amazed many of us in our childhood. From their tales, it is seen that although their living was much simpler as compared to the present times, yet, the society was infested with numerous prejudices. My widower father-in-law once shared his grandmother’s widowhood journey in between our conversation; he stated that his grandmother lost her husband when his father was three years old and some of her husband’s relatives had sold his grandmother to a person in exchange of money, leaving his father all alone. This century-old past incident made me shocked and surprised, leading me to explore a deeper understanding of widowhood. Looking over to the literatures related to comprehensive exploration of widowhood, at first the major works of Helena z. Lopata on Widowhood in an American Society (1973) and Women as Widows (1979) came into notice. The effects of loss of a spouse can be distinguished by two super-ordinate processes; wherein one process includes profound emotional anguish such as sadness or grief and depression and the other process includes pensive cogitations such as self-efficiency, mastery and self-esteem (Carr et al 2000; Hayslip, Allen and McCoy-Roberts 2000; Lund, Caserta and Dimond 1993). Widowhood is correlated with depression, social anxiety, loneliness and financial hardship (Stevens 1995; Bennett 1997; Van Baarsen et al 1999), economic insecurity, discrimination, stigmatization and detrimental traditional practices related to their marital status (21 June 2021 Explainer) and teaches them to steer the household and financial responsibilities as well (Utz et al 2004).

Globally, it is estimated that approximately one in ten widows lives in the extreme poverty. As per 2001 census; widows represent 9 per cent of over 34 million female populations in India, yet the researchers and policy makers have paid scant attention to this group (Agarwal 1998; Chen 2000; Drèze and Sen

2002). Since women tend to marry older men, live longer and less likely to remarry; hence, they are more prevalent than their widower counterparts (Binstock and George 2001). Besides, the older widows report low levels of wellbeing and social support than their married counterparts (Thuen and Reime 1997) and are at higher risk of hospitalization (Laditka and Laditka 2003). Moreover, stigma of widowhood lowers a woman's social status and viewed as inauspicious especially when someone becomes widow soon after the marriage and usually regarded as vulnerable category in India (Mohindra Haddad and Narayana 2012). Indeed, the later life of widowhood may be more challenging due to growing age-related health issues (Binstock and George 2001); however, they may experience less traumas than their younger counterparts because passing away of spouse in old age is usual and may mitigate them of caring obligations (Keene and Prokos 2008).

It is evident from the literatures that the journey of widowhood is much challenging and it becomes more challenging for a woman if she loses her husband at younger age and their experiences depend on the particular societal and cultural domain. Although there burgeoning numbers of literatures are available on widowhood and elderly, yet, very less literatures have covered early widowhood as well as the entire journey of a widow until her old age. So far, upon reviewing the existing literatures, hardly any specific literature was found in this regard in context of Assam. Within this frame of references, this study tries to explore the experiences of the elderly widows as a process of transition, who lost their spouses in their young age.

### **Study Methods**

The analysis of this study is based on qualitative approach which was conducted in the Sivasagar district of Assam. Although there was no particular age limit for considering and remarking the period of early widowhood; however, looking into the subject matter of the study, the researcher considered those elderly who lost their spouses before their age of 40 years. By using purposive sampling method, there total 16 participants were interviewed in the study.

A semi-structured interview schedule was prepared and the participants were interviewed one-on-one in their respective residences within a private ambience. All interviews were recorded with due approval of the participants assuring them to be used only for the research purpose. The recorded audios were listened several times by the researcher herself, carefully transcribed and reviewed it. The interview contained questions such as 'please tell me about your life-experience till now and the roles and responsibilities you have been performing and how it impact your life, how you have restored your life playing multiple roles after losing your spouse, what challenges you face, how you have experienced the period of early and later widowhood and the differences you experience in between two' etc. The researcher tried to create a friendly environment with the participants by appreciating their roles and responsibilities and while asking such questions, the researcher said, "these are few aspects I want to know from you, you can start from anywhere you wish and leave as per your convenience, my interest is only to know your experiences".

### **Findings**

Considering the objective of the study, this paper is presented into two key sections. The first section provides a brief overview of the socio-economic backgrounds of the participants and the second section presents the major themes that emerged from the study. The age-range of the participants was from 60 to 86 years and they were categorized into three age-groups based on the World Health Organization

(WHO)'s definitions where 10 participants belong to the younger-old (60-75 years) age-group, 04 participants belong to the old-old (75-85 years) age group and 02 participants belong to the very-old (85 years and above) age-group. In terms of socio-economic status, 11 participants belonged to low-income families and 05 participants belonged to middle-income families. Six participants were self-employed and 10 had no specific occupation and were dependent on others. Among the low-income participants, 4 sell homemade rice-liquor and poultry, while 2 work as daily wage earners and also sell rice-liquor and poultry. The middle-income participants either had their own income or receive monthly pensions from family members. The participants' educational backgrounds were largely limited, with only 2 having completed secondary education and the rest having only primary education. Nine participants live in nuclear families with 4-5 members, while 6 live in joint families with 6-10 members.

The findings of this study unfolded four major themes covering the experiences of widowhood, their roles, responsibilities and challenges. These themes are viz., 'influence of family over grief (support and negligence)', 'suffering alone (struggle and commitment)', restored self-esteem and self-confidence' and 'later life (blend of positivity and negativity)'.

### **Theme 1: Influence of Family over Grief (Support and Negligence)**

In Indian society, family is a significant component of individual's life and its influence over the course of bereavement is one of the major themes generated through the study. The contact of widowed person with family members and friends increases immediately after death of the spouse in early period of grief (Lopata 1996). Besides, women come across other issues related to debt, shame and survival in the initial period of widowhood (Mohindra, Haddad and Narayana 2012).

Although the term 'family' carries a broader and diverse meaning; however, from the perspective of the participants, findings are presented in two precise ways; while, all the participants in the study recognized all the members belonged to the same ancestral background as family members; yet, some of them recognized specifically those members who have direct blood relationship with their husbands i.e. parents-in-laws, husband's brothers' family, sister-in-law as their family members and some recognized relatives near or far, especially who stay with them in their adversities. The participants believe that the ancestral members are their family but as they do not participate in their everyday lives, hence, they love to recognize the concept of family within this boundary. Besides, unlike the previous study regarding the participants' familial support (Bankoff 1983; Ferraro et al 1984; Lund et al 1990), this study generates both positive and negative outcomes as well. While few elderly expressed positive support from their family members and relatives, few others did not. In this regard, some of the participants shared positive and expected familial influences and while others shared negative and unexpected influences over them.

A 82 years old widow living with her married daughter stated,

"My younger sister took all responsibilities of me and my nine months old daughter single handedly. She had left us five years before but I will never forget her love and care towards us. I cannot express in words how fortunate I am having a sister like her."

This narrative foregrounds the significance of familial relationships, unveiling the intense depth and dedication that a sister can bring to one's life. Although she had faith on her brother, however, had her sister not financially independent, she believes, her existence and the status she carries would have not the same as expected.

A 62 years old who lost her husband at the age of 42 years living alone at home shared,

“When none of my husband’s family did bother about us, my brother-in-law (sister’s husband) saved us from devastation. He had done everything to give us a new life. We lived in my husband’s workplace, when we returned to my husband’s ancestral home after his death; there was not a single room available for us to live in. From purchasing a plot to build a new home and managing my children’s schooling, he did much for us.”

This narrative illustrates that although the husband's home is regarded as the wife's home as well for her life-time as per the societal norms, however, in this particular family, her brother-in-law emerges as a crucial source of support in their hard times. She keeps him beyond family as their lives became stable only because of him. Her husband’s siblings and relatives have participated only in the rituals after the demise of her husband and hardly visited her after that. In this context, Lopata’s (1996) study resemblances the present study.

Another narrative of a 76 years old discloses the negativity and absence of family support-

“My brother-in-law’s family lived under the same roof with separate kitchens. However, we never received any substantial support from them. I cannot forget the negligence I and my sons experienced in those days. While eating, they never asked my sons and instead, closed the door from inside. For a widowed mother, nothing is more painful than seeing her children suffering from hunger.”

She believes death of husband teaches tough lessons to a woman if she is not financially sound. She believes that if she had education, she would not have let her husband’s official documents to burn during the rituals performed after the death of her husband, due to which, she remained deprived of the family pension of her deceased husband and had to face severe financial challenges.

Another 71 years old participant shared,

“Clasping widowhood at a young-age is not only traumatic but the worst curse ever to a woman. Having belonged to a joint family, I noticed and realized the bonding among the family members in my maternal home but same was not present in my matrimonial home. The experiences I received after the death of my husband compelled me to lose faith in blood relation.”

These narratives foreground the crucial role of family during grief. In absence of familial support, individuals may encounter the emotional challenges affecting their overall wellbeing.

## **Theme 2: Suffering Alone (Struggle and Commitment)**

Suffering alone with struggle and commitment after the inceptive period of bereavement, the experiences of early widowhood is a significant aspect needed to be explored., Such individuals already tussle with immense grief and struggle to subsist on one hand; and on the other hand, they also have to carry out their existing commitments. Hence, they perceive themselves shredded between their emotional distress and their sense of commitment at a time.

Regarding such, one 76 years old participant stated,

“In the initial days, I was emotionally stressed as I have lost my income source at that time but responsibilities forced me to adjust with the situation and make my mind to overcome the challenges. I still remember the days when my children used to sell local or home-grown fruits in the nearby bus stoppage in the early morning. They were much younger at that time and I assisted both of them.”

With times, although she got accustomed with the widow-tag, however, becoming a widow at the age of 30 and starting a new phase with three minor children were full of challenges and trauma. She learnt never to underestimate herself and turned herself stronger.

Another 62 years old widow who lost her husband at the age of 26 when her daughter was only 2 years old; she stated,

“What to say? Neither was I happy in our conjugal life nor I could live a good single life after demise of my husband. He abused me both verbally and physically. After his death, his brother started abusing me verbally and therefore I came back to my maternal home. Initially I tried to handle the situation on my own without sharing with my paternal family, but when the situation went beyond my control, I shared everything with my siblings and they took me back to my paternal home. Although my paternal family members never misbehaved us, but who will stop the relatives and the neighbours! I still remember when one of my paternal aunts taunted me for wearing a colourful ‘mekhela’ (the lower part of the Assamese traditional garment) while attending a marriage, as widows are not expected to wear such colourful garments. It hurt me lot and after this incident, I avoided such social functions.”

Another participant aged 82 years shared,

“After one month of demise of my husband, my husband’s family members tried to fix my marriage with an aged person without informing me and my family members to avoid sharing the properties with me. Not only that, they tried to separate me from my 9 months old daughter also.”

The above narratives elucidate the enormous challenges the women encounter after bereavement. It also accentuates the discriminatory attitude of the society toward single women, who are often taken advantage of on account of their susceptibility and weakness.

### **Theme 3: Restored Self-esteem and Self-confidence**

Although most of the participants shared about long-term challenges after bereavement, however, some embraced their widowhood journey positively and restored their self-esteem and self-confidence. Managing their life skillfully, bringing-up children with good character increased their dignity, confidence and self-esteem.

A participant aged 79 years shared,

“Initially, I felt bad when someone used ‘Naren’s (husband’s name) widow’ to mention me. With times, I learnt to ignore such feelings and concentrated to raise my children to be good human beings. I feel proud of my children especially when the neighbours praise me for my dedication towards my family and give example of me as a successful widowed mother.”

She believed that although she has come across different challenges, however, being a widowed mother with miserable condition, her sons were her last hopes to survive. She raised them well and they never let her down in the society. Since she worked in the paddy field and performed all the agricultural activities from ploughing to sowing on her own, some of her neighbors made fun of her by taunting her male. Although she felt bad initially, yet, she mastered to take such remarks positively.

Another participant shared,

“My daughter is my pride and she never gave a single chance to people to question about the character of her and her widowed mother.”

This narrative accentuates the substance of self-esteem and self-confidence of the widowed. She also defines that usually in our society, often the mother is being blamed for any misdeed by children. Again, if such misdeeds are committed by the children of a widowed mother, usual remark comes as ‘had their father remained alive, they could have never done this’. Along with different challenges, character building of the children, especially of the girl child, is an achievement for a widowed mother.

#### Theme 4: Later Life (Blend of Positivity and Negativity)

After reaching depth of the journey of the widows, their later lives attract the most significant domain of the research. The literatures on elderly in later life revealed that although researches indicate affirmative aspects incorporated with transition dealing with discontinuity and changes (Chambers 2005; Collins 2013), some studies evince that the later life of widowhood is deleterious in terms of health and wellbeing (Binstock and George 2001). Moreover, skewed and negative social ties, especially with the adult children may cause unhappiness and stress in their later life (Luscher and Pillemer 1998; Clouston 2003; Fiori et al 2006; De Jong Gierveld and Dykstra 2008). Besides, bonding with siblings may play a vital role in widowhood, specifically for those who are childless (Connidis, 1992). The life-changing experiences shared by the participants throughout their journey, together with its reflections on their later life, divulged a complex mix of both positive and negative outcomes. In case of positive experiences of ageing from the societal perspective, the participants talked about the benefits provided by the government and the respect, regard and care an elderly individual receives from the government and society respectively. On contrary, the increasing disabilities with growing age, loss of control, being dependent on others are the most common individual perspectives. The study revealed that the nature of impacts of ageing on anyone life's mostly depends on their socio-economic status, familial relationship and the treatment and care they have been receiving.

A 86 years old participant shared,

“By the grace of god, although I have not faced any financial challenges yet, but with my growing age, I am losing my physical and mental stability. Sometimes I feel I am becoming a burden on my daughter. Besides, seeing my daughter getting old and imagining her uncertain future in absence of me makes me anxious every day. Tell me, can my daughter expect any care from her brother who never cares for his widow mother?”

Being a widowed mother in her younger age and dedicating herself to her children, she receives no care from her son and daughter-in-law. Now she accepts all as her destiny.

Another participant aged 62 years shared,

“When my husband was alive, he frequently abused me physically and verbally. I hoped my son will be different, but I was wrong. He is more abusive than his father was, especially when he gets drunk; due to which I spent many sleepless nights. What to say, peace is not in my destiny, do not know why the blind god keeps me alive!”

She believes that financial hardship can be manageable, but not the mental peace. She believes her son violates her expectation by not understanding her emotions and not providing any financial support. Moreover, as her son followed the footsteps of his father, she is often being blamed for her parenting.

A 82 years old participant shared,

“Although I do not have income of my own, I never faced any financial hardship in my life. My sister was my support, strength and courage. I believe I should have died instead of her. Her death broke me both physically and mentally.”

Another participant aged 78 years shared,

“With increasing age, I am losing my physical and mental health. Spouse's death became acceptable for me with times, but death of daughter in presence of mother is traumatic and unacceptable, much like an inner death to me. Besides, thinking about the future of my unmarried daughter is becoming more stressful for me now.”

These narratives divulged that both have faced neither financial hardship nor got abused by their children. The elderly who received support from her sister believes that except the conjugal life with her husband, she received all the required cares, supports, love and respect from her daughter, son-in-law, sisters and brother's family. In both cases, losing their loved ones affected their physical and mental well-being. However, in case of one, uncertain future of her unmarried daughter in absence of her makes her more stressed.

This study revealed that the journey of widowhood and experiences might vary based on age, working status and kinship ties. Widows, specifically in their younger state of age got to grips with social disgrace, restrictions on occupation as well as in social and community activities. Fear and precariousness struck at the initial period, yet, with passing time, these women resumed their roles in their respective households with confidence. Few elderly admitted absolute positive support from their family and relatives and some others admitted in negative. Based on the family-concept and shared experiences of the participants, the study reflects ambiguous and diplomatic outcomes regarding the familial relationship with other family members. Moreover, support from community is neither adequate nor long-lasting. Their children became grown-up, enabled themselves to take-up the financial responsibilities and made their mother relieved. With regard to remarriage of the participants, the widows usually did not prefer to be remarried, as there was the fear of possible negligence from the new husband towards her children. The study by Mohindra, Haddad and Narayana, (2012) supports the outcome of the present study. Apart from that, remarriage of widows were unconventional and hardly happened in their period.

Moreover, even though the participants are living with their family members, not all are receiving the care they require; a part of them are getting the proper cares but rests are deprived of it. They are confronting health related issues, which include rheumatic pain, respiratory problems and difficulties while moving and have been confronting financial difficulties to meet the health care costs. Besides, alike the study of Binstock and George (2001), this study also signifies that the later life of widowhood is more challenging due to increasing health related ailments, however, the earlier period is more traumatic.

## Conclusion

The study has discussed the experiences and perceptions of the elderly widows belonged to the rural areas of Assam who lost their husbands at their younger age and brought to light some significant aspects. Although the government has introduced and implemented many schemes for the wellbeing of the widowed elderly, yet, they are still undergoing various challenges in different phases of their life. There is the need to respect their entity and accept their existence with due dignity without any discrimination. The study covered fewer samples and could not cover all the aspects of life course of the elderly widows of Assam and it can pave the way for future research. In that context, the role of the family, kinship, community and Government is worth observing.

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