

Research Article

## Understanding the Complexities of Widowhood in Nepal

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### ABSTRACT



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In Nepalese culture, the term "widow" is laden with negative connotations, contrasting with the seldom-mentioned "widower." Widows face significant social stigma, economic challenges, and emotional hardship fueled by societal perceptions that label them as threats and diminish their self-worth. This study, focusing on 15 widows in Mahankal Rural Municipality, Lalitpur, explores the impact of widowhood on their social status, health, and economic well-being. Methodologically, qualitative data was collected through interviews. Findings reveal that widows endure loneliness and isolation, often receiving minimal healthcare prioritization and limited familial support during illness. Their authority in social and religious activities diminishes post-widowhood due to societal beliefs that consider their participation inauspicious. The stigma surrounding widowhood contrasts their previous higher social status, often relegating them to lower esteem within their communities. Remarkably, while most widows oppose remarriage due to societal traditions, a minority support the possibility of it. Financially, respondents reported worsened conditions post-loss, frequently seeking support from relatives. Although many had managed their incomes independently before becoming widows, autonomy in financial decisions sharply declined thereafter. Challenging claims to their late husband's property further complicates their economic struggles. Ultimately, this investigation highlights the persistent barriers widows face in Nepal, stressing the urgency for targeted research and advocacy efforts to promote their dignity and rights, thereby addressing the neglect of widowhood in women's rights discussions.

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### Introduction

In Nepalese culture, the term "widow" carries many negative meanings, while "widower" is rarely mentioned. Widows were taken as threats not only to common people but often seen as threats to married women, suspected of wanting to take their husbands. They are known by their late husband's name and are among the poorest and most abused members of society. Widows often face ridicule and are subjects of jokes and proverbs that perpetuate harmful beliefs, which diminish their self-confidence. Even in the modern age, the treatment of widows remains harsh (Giri, 2002).

Researchers look into various aspects of widowhood, including the social stigma faced by women, the economic struggles that arise from losing a partner, and the emotional toll from grief and isolation. By studying individual stories, sociologists can understand how society's views shape widows' lives, affecting their access to resources and social connections. This paper aims to show the barriers these women face, expecting improvement in their lives and promote fairness.

Many widows suffer from violence, sexual harassment, and mistreatment, often stemming from disputes over inheritance and property. They typically have to deal with economic dependency, the challenge of raising their children, and

restrictions on their freedom. Despite societal progress, the perception of widows remains largely unchanged. They are often invisible until media highlight their struggles.

Widows experience significant mental and emotional challenges, shouldering responsibilities alone after their husband's death. This requires them to cultivate inner strength and become decision-makers in their families. NGOs and international organizations are involved in studies concerning the empowerment of widows, examining their social status and the impact of advocacy efforts.

There is a notable lack of systematic research on widows, including their demographics, needs, and contributions to their own communities. Widowhood is a neglected issue in wider discussions on women's rights. Projects designed for women often overlook the specific requirements of widows. In conflict-affected areas like Nepal, the number of widows is increasing, making it urgent to address their status and needs to help them live with dignity. Research on this topic is essential to locate their social status and encourage actions benefiting widows.

### Literature on Widowhood

A multitude of investigations has been undertaken concerning widows, resulting in a substantial repository of scholarly writings on this topic. This section focuses primarily

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on synthesis of antecedent research pertaining to the socio-economic standing of women who are widowed.

The occurrence is biological, given that male mortality rates exceed those of females across all age demographics; the probability of death, contingent upon age and sex, is markedly higher for males than for females. However, this reality carries additional challenges for the surviving female partners. Advanced age brings specific risks, notably impoverishment on a fixed income. Moreover, the aging physique is particularly vulnerable to ailments, including organic brain syndromes and cerebral arteriosclerosis. Ultimately, the unfortunate circumstances and solitude experienced by some individuals can culminate in psychological disorders, including severe depression that may lead to suicidal inclinations (Shoib et. al., 2023).

Women generally outlive men, rendering the surviving partner predominantly female. While women typically exhibit superior coping strategies in comparison to men, certain demographics of women remain particularly susceptible to challenges (Chalise, Bohara & Khanal, 2022). A decline in respect from their offspring significantly impacts the psychological well-being of older individuals; many feel that younger generations perceive them as incapable of contributing economically to their families' sustenance and consequently as a burden. A framework of suitable care and socio-economic security for elderly individuals ought to be formulated, meticulously considering the concerns of women (Sangraula, 2005).

The progression of age modifies the occupational status for many individuals. Although occupational standing may not reflect substantial alterations, the authority associated with that status typically wanes. With age, they accumulate invaluable life experiences that are essential for nourishing subsequent generations. However, amidst poverty and economic hardship, most middle-aged individuals exhibit minimal interest in, and limited opportunities to appreciate, the life-course experiences of the elderly, particularly the elderly widow.

In contrast, due to a deficiency in an active social life, the elderly widow continues to encounter adversities. Elderly widows in Nepal find themselves trapped between escalating living expenses. Other elements we may investigate are primarily psychological in nature. An illustration includes melancholy and cognitive decline of widows. Contrary to prevalent assumptions, significant depressive episodes are notably less common among older widow than among younger widows. However, elderly widows frequently report a greater number of depressive symptoms. In addition to these physiologically rooted conditions, the psychological stressors associated with aging can precipitate various psychological disorders in widows (UNDAW, 2001).

Household headship acts as an indicator of social and, by extension, economic standing. In traditional societies, headship is generally regarded as indicative of an individual's authority within the household, especially regarding household decision-making. An examination of the elderly population concerning whether an individual serves as the head or an ordinary member of the household indicates that males are significantly more likely to assert control within the household compared to females. Of the overall elderly demographic, 52 percent are identified as household heads, while 48 percent are ordinary members. However, this statistic can be misleading if not analyzed by gender. For example, among elderly males, 84.2 percent are reported as heads, whereas the corresponding figure for females is a mere 15.1 percent. The considerable proportion of males as household heads reflects the prevailing status of males within society. Moreover, males are also more inclined than females to exert influence over their siblings, as they typically manage land titles and other household assets (Qiu et.

al., 2019). This data indicates that the probability of women suffering from discrimination in general and the widow from types of gender-based discrimination in particular is high.

There have been numerous occurrences of elders being unjustly denied their rightful ownership of property and other legitimate entitlements. These elders often find themselves residing in precarious conditions. To mitigate their suffering, it has been deemed essential to establish provisions for social security and legal protection (Chalise et. al., 2022). A study in Nepal finds that widows are having a prolonged stress hindering their daily functioning. Their levels of suicidality were notably high. Social marginalization, conflict-related traumatic events, poverty, and family stressors were reported as co-occurring important determinants influencing persistent complex grief (Kim et. al. 2017).

Due to the busyness of youth and the evolving lifestyles, the chasm between the two generations is widening. The elder generation perceives the younger one as being advantageous owing to the latter's inclination towards embracing behaviors and values that promote continual integration into society. Families, neighbors, and the community are those who can assist the older adults. Particularly in Nepal, the elderly are revered as the heads of the family unit. Research has indicated that it is the family's duty to ensure the welfare of older individuals, and families ought to bolster them by providing adequate care within their residences.

It is widely that the marginalized elderly people are either purposely or accidentally left out of many programs. Many cannot participate in savings and credit initiatives and are often ignored in HIV/AIDS programs, even though they care for ill family members. They are frequently overlooked in emergency programs, despite being especially vulnerable during disasters and conflicts, and their experiences offer important lessons from past emergencies. Gender biases worsen the effects of exclusion. Older women face more marginalization than older men, especially in family decision-making and development activities, with a high chance of widowhood leading to exclusion. However, older men's caregiving roles are also frequently overlooked. Poverty is the biggest barrier to a secure old age, and many in developing countries face lifelong deprivation. Contributing factors include reduced physical strength, poor health, landlessness, employment discrimination, and limited access to resources, education, and training opportunities.

We are entrenched in the custom of venerating our elders; however, our traditions are being undermined by the shifting dynamics of the world, the desire for smaller familial units, poverty, and the process of urbanization. In consideration of this predicament, if the elderly are actively involved in pursuits that align with their interests and competencies, in conjunction with the maintenance of our worthy customs and culture, a variety of skills and expertise can be sustained. Furthermore, the increasing social responsibility and commitment will also materialize. Persistent endeavors from the familial sphere to the national spectrum are crucial to preserving intimacy, concord, and mutual confidence between the younger and older generations while safeguarding religious convictions, cultural principles, and societal norms. A recent study explored that a significant percentage of Nepalese women become widows at a young age, with 73% marrying in their teenage years. The society complicates remarriage, causing behavior changes in widows, including aggression and depression (Lamichhane, 2023).

Besides, widows in Nepal face double disadvantages. They face stigma and lead disadvantaged lives within their families and communities. Additionally, most healthcare institutions are privately owned and profit-driven, and there is a lack of adequate government health and social security systems for the elderly (Shrestha et. al., 2021). Therefore, it can be said that widowhood can result in psychological problems, such as severe

depression and suicidal thoughts, especially affecting women, who usually live longer than men. While women may have better ways to cope, some struggle with feeling disrespected by their children and see themselves as a burden. There is a need for proper care and economic support for older people, especially women. The gap between generations is growing, and marginalized elderly often miss out on assistance. Social dynamics and urbanization threaten the respect elders once received, making it crucial to involve them in activities.

### Research Methodology

The study predominantly employed a descriptive and exploratory research framework considered suitable for the inquiry. For the purpose of this examination, Mahankal Rural Municipality, Ward No. 03, Gotikhel, Lalitpur District was selected. This location was chosen due to the adequate availability of respondents within this ward. The research area consisted of 75 widows, from which 15 widows were chosen employing a purposive sampling strategy.

Various sources including interviews, observations, and key informant interviews were utilized to collect primary data. Additionally, several prior research studies relevant to this subject were reviewed. Numerous articles, books, and journals pertinent to this investigation were also scrutinized. Very few quantitative data was collected, however, the paper validates qualitative data only. Among a spectrum of qualitative data collection methods, interviews were utilized during the study. The interviews aimed to gather information on economic conditions, income, expenditures, property ownership, and occupational status.

### Discussion on Social Status of Widows

This section aims to concentrate on the examination and discourse of empirical data acquired during the fieldwork, with a meticulous analysis of the demographic characteristics of the study area and the socio-economic conditions of widowed women. Additionally, this section addresses the social status of the respondents within the study area. The data collected regarding the social dimensions of the respondents during the field investigation is presented herein. The information gathered pertaining to the relevant topic reflects the social status of widows within the study area.

### Health Status

Health is a paramount asset for individuals. Only those in good health can attain success in their lives. The health status of an individual results from the interplay of biological, social, and environmental elements. An individual's health condition is influenced by dietary habits, care received during illness, and medical treatment. It is found that all widows included as sample during the study were suffering from loneliness and isolation, a symptom of chronic mental illness. They were less inquired on their state of health and were least prioritized for medication in their own family.

### Care During Illness

Illness is an inevitable aspect of life. During such times, individuals require care, which they typically receive from family members. The study indicates that the majority of respondents received care from their husbands during illness prior to becoming widows, as the husband is regarded as the head of the household. Respondents expressed that it is primarily the husband's duty to provide care during their times of illness; conversely, a limited number received care from family prior to widowhood. Following the loss of their spouse, most respondents assumed the role of caregiver for themselves, with only a small percentage i.e. 13. 33% receiving care from their families thereafter.

### Medication and Treatment

Individuals seek treatment for ailments at various locations, including hospitals, medical facilities, and traditional healers. Respondents were inquired about their preferred treatment locations, and the responses varied accordingly. It was observed that the majority of respondents opt for hospital care, believing they will receive superior treatment at a minimal cost, while a smaller number sought assistance from traditional cultural healers due to their belief in such superstitious practices. However, the family in which they were living were less responsive for taking the sick widows to the hospital.

### Participation in Religious Activities

Religion is defined as the belief in a supreme authority. It serves as a governing influence and shapes an individual's mindset. Religious endeavors refer to activities grounded in faith, such as acts of worship. Diverse responses were garnered from participants regarding their involvement in religious practices prior to and following the loss of a spouse. It has been observed that a significant majority of respondents engaged more in religious activities prior to becoming widowed, as they were permitted to partake in such functions and their presence was valued by others. Conversely, a smaller contingent reported diminished participation before becoming widowed. The majority indicated that their involvement in these activities declined after widowhood due to societal disapproval of their participation, with claims of being excluded from certain religious practices under the belief that they are deemed inauspicious. A limited number of respondents continued to partake in these activities as they did previously, even after the death of their spouse.

### Perceptions of Widowhood by Others

In the research area, it was noted that respondents encountered varied reactions from family and peers pre- and post-widowhood. The majority reported receiving positive responses (marked by non-discrimination) from family and others before becoming widowed, attributed to their elevated status owing to their husbands. They were embraced at celebratory events without bias, considered harbingers of good fortune. They received respect in their interactions, with only a minority experiencing negative responses even before widowhood. The greatest number of respondents noted receiving negative reactions (indicative of discrimination) following the loss of their husbands, as their social standing diminished, resulting in difficulties even in obtaining minimal support from others. They expressed feelings of being stigmatized as "husband-eaters" due to prevalent superstitions, while a smaller number continued to experience positive responses as before.

### Participation in Social Activities Prior to and Following Widowhood

Social activities encompass events that occur within the community and possess intrinsic social significance. Such activities include social, cultural, and religious ceremonies, such as those marking births, deaths, feasts, marriages, and festivals. Notable variations emerged in the participation of respondents in social activities before and after they became widowed.

The majority of the participants indicated that they engaged more in social activities prior to becoming widowed, as they were eager to participate, and others appreciated their involvement in such gatherings. They noted that they received a warm reception before their widowhood. However, their participation significantly declined after they became widows. This reduction was attributed to a diminished interest in these activities, as well as a perception among others that their presence was inauspicious. They expressed that they would

participate only out of necessity, while a smaller subset continued to attend such functions as before, despite their widowhood.

### Decision-Making Role in Household Activities

Decision-making refers to the process of determining actions to pursue or avoid. Involvement in decision-making reflects the status of the participants within the family structure. In fact, the role in decision-making delineates the positioning of the respondents within their households. The respondents reported having less significant roles in decision-making regarding their personal lives and other household matters prior to widowhood, as they indicated that their husbands were primarily responsible for making decisions. Following their transition to widowhood, they experienced freedom in choosing their paths, no longer subject to their husbands' control over personal matters. Nevertheless, their leadership in household activities was not universally acknowledged.

### Perspectives on Remarriage

Remarriage, as referenced throughout this analysis, pertains to a woman's decision to marry again after losing her spouse. A range of perspectives emerged from respondents regarding remarriage when prompted. The majority expressed opposition to the idea, asserting that marrying again contravenes the prevailing societal traditions. Their views suggest a proclivity towards traditionalism and conservatism, which explains their reluctance to challenge established norms. Conversely, a smaller proportion of the respondents articulated supportive positions regarding widow remarriage, recognizing its significance.

### Opinions on Religious Norms

Nearly all participants in the study indicated that they adhered to Hinduism. They expressed their belief in Hinduism and stated that they engage in all social functions and rituals in accordance with the norms, values, and principles of the faith. They celebrate festivals as per Hindu traditions. The respondents conveyed that they are incapable of embracing other religions, as they are profoundly connected to the tenets, values, and convictions of Hinduism. Given that Hinduism favors red, widows are traditionally discouraged from donning red attire. The respondents noted that they refrain from wearing red or colorful garments; however, they expressed a favorable opinion towards widows wearing such colors. Furthermore, the conventionally accepted white attire for Nepali widows is not favored by the respondents. They mentioned that widows wearing white garments is undesirable, yet it is a compulsion for them. They articulated feelings of unattractiveness in white clothing, as it makes them conspicuous to others as widows. They conveyed that wearing white serves as a reminder of their husband's passing, hence their aversion to it. Some respondents stated that, despite their lack of interest, they are compelled by their families to wear these garments.

### Feelings of Loneliness in Widows

All participants in the study reported experiencing loneliness following their husband's demise due to their emotional bonding with him and the significant role he played in their lives. They articulated feelings of isolation after their husband's death, rooted in love, affection, and emotional connection. They acknowledged that even when they receive love and care from their children, they sometimes feel a void, which leads them to weep in solitude.

### Perception of Restrictions on Attending Social Functions

All respondents indicated that they still face restrictions when it comes to participating in social functions, as they are perceived as inauspicious or unfortunate, which they find

objectionable. They argued that their participation in such events would not result in negative consequences and is merely a superstitious belief held by society.

### Perspectives on Widowhood

All respondents in the study conveyed that being a widow is viewed negatively. They remarked that once a married woman becomes a widow, she becomes the target of disdain, leading to a diminished social standing. The societal perception of them remains unfavorable, despite significant changes over time.

### Views on the Presence of Single Women at Auspicious Occasions

All the participants in the research area expressed their disapproval regarding the presence of unmarried women at auspicious events, perceiving it as detrimental, based on societal misconceptions. Several widows are beginning to confront the stigma associated with the traditional white attire, endeavoring to assert their individuality and reclaim their identities beyond their marital status. This shift may be propelled by broader social movements advocating for gender equality and the rights of marginalized communities. As widows increasingly engage in social and cultural activities, they may opt to wear colors that symbolize joy, strength, or personal style rather than confining themselves to conventional mourning garments. This evolution may indicate a growing acceptance of single women within society and a progression towards more inclusive cultural customs.

### Economic Assistance from Others

The respondents (widows) in the study area indicated that their financial situation deteriorated following their husband's death, leading them to encounter numerous economic challenges. Consequently, they often relied on financial support from family members, neighbors, and relatives to sustain their livelihood. The majority of the respondents reported receiving financial assistance from relatives due to the close connections that facilitate a better understanding of their circumstances, while a smaller segment received support from family.

### Autonomy in Income Utilization

Autonomy in income utilization refers to the ability to allocate one's earnings at one's discretion. During the investigation, an effort was made to ascertain whether the respondents (widows) possessed the ability to manage their income independently or if they were compelled to depend on others for its use. It was revealed that most respondents had enjoyed the freedom to manage their income independently prior to becoming widows, as they were not burdened by significant responsibilities and could act according to their volition. Conversely, a smaller number reported lacking independence in income utilization even after their husband's passing.

A considerable number of respondents indicated a loss of autonomy regarding their income management following widowhood, as family members exercised control over their finances. However, a minority, approximately 40%, claimed the right to independently manage their income despite their status as widows. The ability to independently utilize their income empowers the respondents in the study area, fostering their confidence to act according to their needs and interests.

### Share of Husband's Property

Acquiring a portion of their late husband's estate proves to be quite challenging for widows. Respondents in the research area mentioned that they received both cash and land as their share of their husband's property. Numerous individuals obtained substantial portions of land and assets from their deceased spouses. And, diversity was observed in the responses

when participants were queried about their total land holdings. All women possessed a significant share of land.

## Conclusion

Health is important for success and is affected by biological, social, and environmental factors. A person's health is linked to diet, illness management, and medical care. A study revealed that all interviewed widows felt lonely and isolated, showing signs of chronic mental health issues. They received little health care and were often not prioritized for medication by their families.

Illness is a part of life that generally needs care from family. Most participants relied on their husbands for care but had to rely on themselves after becoming widows. Only 13.33% received support from family. Although respondents preferred hospital treatment as more effective and affordable, families often chose not to take sick widows to the hospital, opting for traditional healers instead.

Religion, as a belief in a higher power, affects people's thoughts and actions. Participants discussed their religious activities before and after losing a spouse. Most were more involved in religious practices when their partners were alive but reported lesser engagement post-widowhood due to social disapproval. A few maintained their previous level of involvement.

Participants faced different reactions from family and peers. Before widowhood, most received positive feedback and had a higher social status. Afterward, they faced discrimination and a loss of status, making it harder to get support. Some felt stigmatized due to superstitions, while a few received positive responses after bereavement.

Regarding social activities, many engaged in community events before widowhood but participated less afterward due to feeling unwelcome. Participants had less say in decisions while married but felt they could make more choices as widows, though not all were recognized as leaders.

Responses about remarriage varied, with most opposing it due to societal traditions. Most identified as Hindus and followed customs, feeling unable to adopt other religions. Participants had negative views of widowhood, feeling stigmatized and isolated. Social restrictions on attending events were viewed as superstitions.

Participants noted worsened financial situations after their husbands' deaths, seeking help from relatives, with fewer turning to immediate family. While many had financial autonomy before widowhood, they felt a loss of control afterward; less than a half of the widow still managed their income, which provided some empowerment. However, claiming a share of their late husband's property was challenging, often receiving cash and land but struggling for substantial assets.

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