



Exploring Vulnerabilities of Disaster-Induced Widows

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Abstract

The Uttarakhand flood of 2013 in India has taken many families' bread-earner. Usually, the status of Indian widows, especially in North India, is deplorable, associated with social discrimination and economic deprivation. This paper explores the multi-dimensional vulnerabilities of 20 women widowed during this disaster through a qualitative method. The results indicate financial difficulties, despite farming and husbandry activities for subsistence, leading to a lack of education and decent nutrition for children. This paper makes recommendations for convincing policymaking, adapted to widows' needs.

Keywords: Widowhood, vulnerability, Uttarakhand, Disaster, Floods

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1.0 Introduction

The 2013 inundation in North India floods was one of India's biggest catastrophes after the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004. The neighboring country of Nepal and three Indian States situated close to the Himalayas were affected: Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh. During four consecutive days, 14-17 June 2013, water deluge from heavy rainfall and melting snow caused torrential floods and avalanches. The recorded rainfall was almost five times the standard benchmark for the region's precipitation (Uttarakhand: Rescue efforts, 2013). The India Meteorological Department broadcasted repeated advisories, predicting heavy rains, which were ignored by the local residents. The resultant loss of life and property was huge: 5748 people perished, and 4200 villages were affected. More than 89% of the casualties were reported in Uttarakhand (India resist flood death toll, 2013, Kumar, 2013).

Most of the people who perished in these calamities were working men. The usual occupation of these victims were temple priests, hotel workers, and porters. Moreover, people who were making the Kedarnath pilgrimage on horse or mule backs were also deadely affected by this disaster. They left behind approximately 300 widows in Ukhimath Tehsil (Rudraprayag district). The flood-affected widows received some governmental support: Rs. 5 lakhs compensation, monthly widow pension of 100 Rs, and a cow. As studies related to widowhood are quite limited (Chandra, 2011), this paper intends to explore these widows' situation five years after the disaster, identifying primary vulnerabilities. The psychosocial disabilities of disaster-laden widows are perceptibly higher than the other widows (Grace and Sekar, 2013). Ravaged by calamitous events, compounded by the loss of breadwinners' death, they are more vulnerable. The researcher conducted a qualitative study with 20 widows. The first section of this paper reviews the literature on widowhood status in India to better understand its issues. The second part of the study presents the results and emphasizes the types of sufferings widows faced, especially economic deprivation. The last section discusses the findings and offers a conclusion to this work, including recommendations for policymakers.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Widowhood in India

The number of Indian widows has been steadily increasing. According to the 2011 census data, 4.6% of the population were widows, whereas widows were representing only 0.7% of the population in 2001. This remarkable increase may be explained by the improved life expectancy of women (Shivakumar, 2015). Other socio-cultural conditions may also explain this fact. The author would suggest that women often follow a healthier lifestyle than men, especially addictions. Socially, women are not allowed to smoke or drink alcohol, which ensures their relative good health compared to men. Alcoholism has been a pandemic, affecting the Indian continent, leading to early diseases due to health issues and/or

accidents. Despite women's relatively healthy lifestyle, widowhood in India is quite pathetic, associated with social neglect and isolation, economic poverty, and restrictions.

2.2 Socio-Cultural Discriminations

Socio-cultural pressures, which have prevailed for centuries in large parts of India, have led to the pitiable, miserable condition of many widows. The 2015 Global Widows Report, conducted in 17 developing countries, indicates that 18% of Indian widows face some deprivation, 24% of them felt inexplicable rebuke of being a widow (Bhattacharya and Singh, 2017).

The social-cultural perception of widowhood carries pangs of discrimination and restrictions, which negatively impact widows' lives and familial relationships. This marginalized situation can lead to such extremes that widows are entirely isolated and left on their own, without any support. Widows are usually derided as a bad omen for any happy occasion, such as weddings, childbirths, or house-warmings and, excluded from these ceremonial, social events. This social dejection is often accompanied by mental as well as physical harassment. Sahoo (2014) depicted dramatic living conditions for North Indian widows, compared to social death by Mohini Giri, a veteran activist for women's rights. For instance, in Punjab, widows are referred to as prostitutes and married off to the husband's brother to prevent rape. In Uttarakhand, some widows living without any male family members are scared about sexual abuse and violence. When some drunk men knock on their doors at night or physically harass them, they are reluctant to go to the police station and file a complaint against the perpetrators because they fear the consequences (Chakrabarty, 2018). Sahoo (2014) suggested that widows who pursue the courts for justice risk physical and psychological violence because they have challenged society's patriarchal norms.

Amid this social discrimination, widows may be categorized according to socio-democratic profile and dedication to spiritual life. Chen (1997) classified widows into three groups, according to the characteristics of their lives: child widows, ascetic widows, and independent widows. Child widows have the option to get re-married according to cast prescriptions, while ascetic widows, entirely dedicating to religious practices, are likely to benefit from family support. Independent widows keep following their household duty and face the most difficulties in the absence of a masculine child in age to work. Indeed, the gender preferences in Indian culture prescribe boys to go out and work while girls are supposed to only look after the household duties. Therefore, a boy child could support his widowed mother while the girl would have very little chance to do so.

"Only 28% of the widows in India are eligible for pensions, and of that number, less than 11% actually receive the payments to which they're entitled. If a woman is not financially independent, she's at the mercy of her in-laws and her parents. And if they don't have the will or the resources to take care of her and her children, she's on her own "- ('A Life of Ashes- the Story of India's Widows,' Radio Netherlands Worldwide Media, 2009).

2.3 Economic Deprivation

Economic deprivation is the primary cause of widows' vulnerabilities. Wadley (1995) represents the life of a Hindu married woman in the form of a tree where the trunk, i.e., the main wood of the tree, is the husband. When the husband dies, it is considered that the main life-giving support disappears, and the branches which represent the kin and other in-laws are helpless. A Hindu woman is traditionally economically dependent on her husband for all her necessary living expenses. She does not have any authority over finances or any other matter. She asks for all necessities from her husband, as after marriage, her sole duty is to look after the husband and children. When she becomes a widow, she cannot rely on her economic autonomy to move forward in life. That explains why widows have lower than average consumption level and higher than average poverty level (Dreze, 1997)

Despite widows' dire economic need, restrictions are imposed on the employment of widows. Rural areas are ruled by conservative norms, constraining women to household chores at home, and disapprove of their lookout for jobs outside the home (Chandra, 2011). Therefore, women are left with very little or quasi no economic opportunities, without proper education and professional experiences. Chen (1997) highlighted that the proportion of widows working is comparably lower than married women because of their old age. He added that younger widows are made to work in less secure and desirable work than married women. However, Chandra (2011) indicated that young widows' living conditions are better in urban areas than in rural areas because access to jobs is more manageable and based on educational qualifications. In the case of Uttarakhand's widows, they are mostly living in remote villages where employment opportunities are very scarce.

In many cases, widows are subjected to patriarchal customs, where men exclusively hold primary roles and powers. Widespread discrimination in inheritance laws unfairly normalizes handing over all assets to male descendants, not females. Such practices make an excruciating impediment for daughters and married women to lay any claim to ancestral property, a significant economic asset in times of financial crisis (Chandrasekhar, 2017). In many cases, widows struggle to retain control over or access even their own dead spouses' property (Jenson, 2005). Numerous cases reported where widows, derided as an economic burden, are forced to take refuge under the inns located in the sacred lands of Varanasi, Mathura, and Vrindavan (Sahoo, 2013).

Besides, access to land ownership is crucial to secure economic security, but it is often denied to widows. Arable land is a critical resource that provides wealth and security for a person. Rural women, especially widows, who have productive land in their names can enjoy better economic prosperity in the face of deprivation. Agarwal (1998) argued that widows who have proprietary rights to fertile land have access to more opportunities such as cultivation, selling, or mortgaging during economic downturn periods. He illustrated that, in India's west and northwestern regions, widows work as laborers in their in-laws' farms or resort to begging or become destitute. Sahoo (2014) reaffirmed the dramatic implications for widows restricted from access to land, such as begging, prostitution which increases their vulnerability to violence against them and contraction of HIV/AIDS. Some rural widows who migrate to the cities, hoping to get better employment, may end up in sexual trafficking rackets. Such reports substantiate that emphasizing customary norms instead of statutory

laws in rural India has led to gross violation of widows' rights. Chen (1997) explains that widows are threatened with death and expulsion from their village in land disputes, even though the law gives them usage rights over their husband's property (in the absence of adult sons) or maintenance rights (in the presence of adult sons). The daughters are refused their rights to the paternal property. Only male sons have access to inheritance, despite the law stipulating the equal share for daughters and sons (Chandra, 2011). In the case of Uttarakhand widows, land appears to be their sole refuge as women are culturally used to tend to the fields and cultivate, doing hard work to produce subsistence farming.

2.4 Impacts on children

Economic deprivation of widows has a considerable impact on the children's well-being. As a rule, widows are unable to manage basic family expenses, ensuing in tight budgets. Children may face malnutrition, lack of education. Instead of sending children to school, they are likely to look for jobs to support the family.

Widows' daughters generally face more difficulties than sons. Sahoo (2014) reported that widows with inadequate economic means are likely to marry off the younger daughter to older men, even if a widower. These widowers may carry the HIV virus, exposing the daughter to increased risks of contracting AIDS (Sahoo, 2014). They will look for a cheap wedding and send off the daughters. However, this kind of wedding may be the source of more vulnerabilities for the women as they will not be respected, given proper education and chances. Instead, they will be exploited as servants and abused sexually. In the worst cases, they may be trafficked.

Those widows who are in extreme poverty struggling to meet the ends may send their children to an ashram. Chakrabarty (2018) mentioned that some Kedarnath Disaster widows had sent their kids to an ashram in Guptkashi run by Yoga Guru Baba Ramdev, where free food, shelter, and education are provided.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Study Design

The study explores the widowhood conditions of women who lost their husbands after a disaster. Therefore, the research study adopted a qualitative method, which is descriptive by nature. In-depth interviews were administered to explore the vulnerabilities of Kedarnath disaster widows using a semi-structured questionnaire. The interview questions were designed to understand how women cope with their widowhood situation. Then, follow-up questions were presented to evaluate how this event triggered vulnerabilities in their lives. Researchers probed the respondents on the several topics mentioned earlier (economic poverty, land ownership, social exclusion, children's education, and nutrition). All the participants were interviewed five years after the disaster.

All the interviews were conducted in the local language. Informed consent of the widows was obtained from each participant. Interviews lasted up to 1 hour and were recorded with

the permission of the participants. Each recording went through the process of transcription and translation into English to start the process of thematic analysis.

The analysis was conducted in several iterative cycles to categorize translated data. First, basic themes were determined by coding the information by identifying specific words and ideas. Then, these basic codes were compared and further aggregated into domains. Three main categories appeared: economic status, social support, and governmental support.

3.2 Participants

Participants of the study were 20 widows of the Garhwali division, selected from the list of 296 widows (Rudraprayag District). Survey interviews were collected from the villages of Nala, Rudrapur, Devar, Chandrapuri, Thyudi, Khumera, and Lamgaundi. These villages within the Ukhimath block are located around Guptkashi, the closest town, through which the pilgrims go to visit the Kedarnath temple. These villages were selected as a convenient sample as the researcher was based in Guptakasi. Therefore the researcher approached all the widows living in the nearby villages from Guptakashi.

The sample is constituted of 25- 60 years old widows with an average age of 37, 8 from the Brahmin and 12 from the Scheduled Tribe (ST) community. Out of the 20 widows, three widows did not attend school, but the rest have qualifications up to 8th. The significant sources of income for local people come from agriculture and animal husbandry. Every household will have, as a minimum, a small piece of land and a cow. They cultivate crops such as wheat, maize, and groundnuts; cattle included oxen, cows, buffaloes, goats, with some people having mules or horses. They either consume the milk or sell it to gain some income. The horses and mules are used to carry loads across the mountains. Oxen help cultivate the land, and goats are usually sold in the market for their meats.

4.0 Results

4.1 Economic Status

Poverty

Out of the 20 widows interviewed, six widows reported poverty being an issue. Here poverty is described as the state of being extremely poor. They did not have the finance or resources to meet the demands of necessary needs in daily life. They lived their lives in extreme situations. When their husbands were alive, they did not have any problem, but there was no more income, and women faced financial difficulties after the demises. Some houses had cracks on the walls. Widows were entirely dependent on the monthly government pension of about Rs. 1000. They found it challenging to meet the educational as well as the nutritional needs of the children. Here are a few quotes from women: "For living food is needed. There is nothing with us.", "Everything is gone on that disaster," "there is nothing left with us."

Unemployment

In the sample, only two widows worked in road construction projects; the balance of respondents was unemployed. Some of them wished to get a job to earn some income. Everyone had a little piece of land, and at least one cow at home, for subsistent farming. They worked on their land to grow some food and survived with it. One woman who worked for road construction said: "I am doing nothing. Whenever there is road construction at that time, I will have work. We don't have anything."

Access to Property

Fourteen widows used the familial land to fulfill some of their necessary needs. In most cases, the widow's family property was not legally divided; it was still in the name of the father-in-law or mother-in-law. One widow mentioned that "the property is in the mother-in-law's name."

4.2 Social Support

Children education expense

Out of the 20 widows, 16 widows had difficulties with children's education expenses. They struggled to pay the children's education fees because they didn't have any alternative income sources. This was one of the widows' primary concerns, along with the nutrition for the children. One widow shared that she preferred to send her kids to the ashram to give them better life chances. Others were adjusting daily needs with the pension amount Rs. 1000 that they received. Widows stated, "Who will help us? the children are small. They need education. Money is needed for that", and "If The government provides some help for the education of the children by any means, then it will be very helpful." Those widows who had grown up sons didn't have any problem because they worked and looked after the family matters.

Lack of natal family support

Out of the sample, only three widows received some help from their brothers, which is minimal. It took the form of payment of educational fees for the kids or some other financial assistance. The rest of the widows didn't receive any support from their families. One of the reasons they told was the lack of resources: "Nothing. They cannot help. They (natal family members) have difficulty in meeting their needs", and "Everyone got their own family to take care. They cannot extend their help outside".

Lack of marital family support

Only two widows from the sample received support from the family because the husband's brother is living nearby. They got some help in the form of vegetables. The rest of the widows didn't receive any support. One widow said: "In these days which will help others. We didn't get any help."

Single-handedly doing things

Most of the widows did not receive any help from the relatives or in-laws. They reported living their life with strength and courage, performing all the activities in their agricultural field. They mentioned, "I am working in my own land. We survive with what we have", "I am doing everything alone."

Hopelessness

The widows exhibited hopelessness during the interview session, even depression in some cases. The absence of their loved ones created a big hole in their lives. For the children's sake, they coped with this negative psychological status by engaging themselves in fieldwork and household chores. Women said: "There is nothing left with us," "Nothing is there. There is nothing for the future," "Now we don't have anything."

4.3 Governmental Support

No Below Poverty Line (BPL) ration card

Fourteen widows had Above Poverty Line (APL) ration card. The BPL ration cardholders receive more ration than the APL ration cardholders, including rice, dhal, and sugar. After their husband's death, widows started living in deplorable conditions; however, their cards were not changed to BPL. They went to the village head and to the local government office to change their ration card but were denied with the excuse that the government had discontinued making BPL cards. One woman explained that "we talked, but they (government officials) are saying they are not making. We need that (BPL card) for the school to get the fee reduction. We did not get the BPL card."

Problems with pension

Only two widows did not receive their pensions yet. In one case, the paperwork was incorrect, and in the other one, the village head asked for a bribe. The widow pension amount is 1000 Rs. Widows mentioned that the payments were not received regularly; sometimes, the gap is 3 to 6 months. This was testified as a big problem for widows because necessary needs could not be fulfilled. Widows reported: "The pension is not coming fixed. It will come after maybe 3 or 6 months' gap. Sometimes when it will come after six months, and we only receive the amount for three months", "it will come once in 3 months or sometimes will take more time."

5.0 Discussion and Conclusion

This explorative case study reveals that widows faced tremendous economic difficulties, which is the main post-disaster concern. Almost all widows struggled to look after their children's education and nutrition. Support from natal or marital families is minimal, and the government's subsidized help is barely enough. The striking feature is that most of the widows used their land, which makes Uttarakhand an exception according to the literature on customary practices in North India. None of the widows reported some dress, economic or cultural restrictions, which indicate that widows may not suffer the social neglect and exclusion as badly as reported in the literature. The lack of reports on social discrimination and abuse may be due to limitations in data collection. A lead researcher is a man from outside Uttarakhand, which might be an inhibiting factor for widows to share their difficulties.

The economic need shared unanimously by widows requires some governmental strategies to provide alternative sustainable livelihoods. Women are likely to cope with their situation and survive without much support, probably because they are the strong field labor

force of the family. As Gupta (2016) indicated, the occupational vulnerability level is an important indicator of coping opportunities. After the disaster, they kept their routine to go to the field and attend to the cow. Augustine (2014) emphasized that survivors' needs may be better addressed through improved livelihoods and community support and empowerment. The Uttarakhand government initiatives to provide a cow to each victim of the disaster was an attempt to provide a sustainable livelihood. If the widow is involved in some livelihood activities in a group, it will provide her additional income and a place to speak and share her emotions.

Additionally, supporting widows in accessing appropriate benefits would be supportive. Several widows reported their inability to change their APL cards into BPL, preventing them from accessing a bigger portion of ration and discounted fees to send children to school. As widows reported dire challenges in educating and feeding their children nutritiously, the authors consider democratic support critical for widows to access adequate schemes.

Beyond management, improved governance has the potential to address the needs of the survivors, especially widows. The government is responsible for implementing effective policies to ensure the widows' welfare and therefore requires tools to define a logical model that suits stakeholders' needs. In this process, verifiable research data and participatory governance are instrumental in understanding the population's needs. Mohanan (2016) suggested using the COBIT 5 framework, a widely accepted comprehensive IT governance and management framework, to develop the National Disaster Management Plan further. As many widows have expressed economic needs and the government's lack or delayed support, instituting a new governance system for disaster survivors would ensure effective support for these vulnerable populations.

To conclude, this paper suggests that the post-disaster activities should emphasize livelihood diversification, sustainability, and democratic support to access schemes' benefits to ensure economic stability to disaster victims.

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Article Contribution to Related Field of Study.

This study contributes to the field of social sciences by understanding the situation of disaster-induced widows in the Indian context who are forming a marginalized group. The topical contribution highlights the various vulnerabilities faced by widows, their interactions

and the contextual specificities. Being explorative, this study is a first step in understanding better widows' situations and make suggestions for policymaking.

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