

## Widows in Rural Bangladesh: An Analysis

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### **Abstract**

*Thousands of the widows of all ages in rural Bangladesh endure extreme poverty, ostracism, violence, homelessness, ill health and discrimination in law and custom. A lack of inheritance and land rights, widow abuse and the rules of remarriage practices of widows are prime examples of human rights violations. In this article, an attempt has been made to provide a socio-economic status for widowhood and social security in the context of widowhood; laws and customs regarding widow's inheritance and the situation of widows who remarry. The article also looks into the needs of specific groups of widows and widowhood; widows' access to employment; changes in ways of life and the problems the widows and their children face. The article concludes with a summary of widowhood as a human rights issue, a global overview of widows, roles of the government and non-governmental organizations and some recommendations for future action.*

**Keywords:** *widows; rural; inheritance; rights; discriminations*

### **Introduction**

Widows in rural Bangladesh are often amongst the poorest and the most vulnerable segment of society as their status in the family, community and society at large is that of destitution, oppression and marginalization. Widows face legal, religious, customary and traditional constraints, including barriers to inheritance, land ownership and land use, rules concerning remarriage, and degrading and harmful mourning rites. They are often deprived of their rights, surviving in stark poverty, homelessness, neglect and remain largely uncared for [1].

### **Introduction**

Social discrimination against the widows in rural Bangladesh is a serious concern. They have no right to the family property and remain mostly in social isolation in the male dominated society and have no choice but to depend on their male relatives. Despite all the hardship and social injustice, the situation of widows remains unreported and unaddressed by the government, the United Nations and its agencies, the media and civil society organizations. But almost everywhere around the world, widows comprise a significant proportion of all women, ranging from 7 per cent to 16 per cent of all adult women. However, in

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some countries and regions the proportion is far higher. At least 245 million women around the world have been widowed and more than 115 million of them live in devastating poverty. According to a report of 2010' there are 4.7 million widows living in Bangladesh [2].

Amongst this already sidelined female population, the widows of rural Bangladesh live a highly vulnerable life not only because of their gender but also because of the socio-cultural customs and flaws in the legal system specially related to the inheritance of property. These women fail to enjoy their rights to income, inherited property, proper living space and remain almost in social isolation in the male dominated society and trapped in a dependency relationship throughout their lives. The main objective of this paper is to highlight the status of widows in rural Bangladesh in the family, community and society. However, the article has restricted focus related to widowhood instead of going for detailed discussion mainly due to its nature. Rather, it will concentrate primarily on the socio-economic characteristics of widows and the social and legal status of Muslim and Hindu widows, prevalent in rural Bangladesh.

#### **Methodology:**

The article has been written on the basis of two main sources: i) Primary Source: A survey on 40 widows in five villages (Kullia, Kuciamora, Amuria, Horishpur and Bolugram) of Magura district has been undertaken by the writer to understand the socio-economic situation of widows which affect their status and compare the widows' social status and position in the Muslim and Hindu communities in rural Bangladesh. A semi-structured interview schedule was formulated in accordance with the article's objective, emphasizing the areas, such as age, religion and education; widows' access to employment; changes in the way of life; remarriage practices; property rights and inheritance; participation in family and community affairs and widows as beneficiaries of government and non-government organizations. And ii) Secondary Source: A review of available literature on widows and relevant studies on women in poverty, women-headed household, census data etc. are included as secondary information (main source for writing the article).

#### ***Socio-economic Status of Widows***

The socio-economic status of widows in rural society is a scenario of discrimination, oppression and marginalization. The lower status of widows in our culture and religions reflects lower status of women throughout the life cycle. Early marriage, practice of polygamy, wide age gaps between husband and wife, loss of husband through accident, illness and natural disasters, longer life expectancy of women over men, results in there being far more widows in society than widowers (Census 1974,1981). They face religious, customary, traditional as well as legal barriers to inheritance, land ownership and practices relating to remarriage. Not only is their access to basic needs highly constrained, but the source of livelihood for this unfortunate group is also extremely limited. The elderly widows who form the largest segment in the group of widows are unacceptable to the employees because of their age. More often than that, even their close ones refuse to provide them with food or shelter (BBS, 1980, 1992).

Abandoned by all, these lonely helpless widows are thrown into the poverty process and are forced to become heads of their own households. A very high proportion of the women-headed households are headed by widows. Despite the fact that they are most oppressed of all women, they are not the focus of attention either of the government or of the non-government organizations. They also receive very scanty attention even from the researchers. Research-based literature exclusively on widows are few and far between.

Hindu widows encounter greater discrimination-social, economic and legal. The practice of remarriage is prevalent among the Muslim widows, while such practice is rare in the Hindu community. The Hindu widows face religious barriers to inheritance while Muslim personal laws are more sympathetic towards widows of the Muslim community [3]. The Hindu widows have to change their food habits immediately after the death of the husband, but the Muslim widows are not required to do so.

### ***Problems Faced by Widows***

Widows are vulnerable in Bangladesh as in most other countries of south Asia. The scenario of widows in rural Bangladesh is even worse than that of urban areas. In addition to poor wages, they are sexually exploited and denied basic human rights. They are discriminated by their husband's family and do not have any space at their maternal home. Besides being illiterate, they have no skills with which they can earn a living. They find themselves cornered from all sides. The widows in rural Bangladesh suffer multiple problems, disadvantages and deprivations. Some are described below;

#### **i) Property Rights and Inheritance Law**

The status of widows is discriminatory as far as property rights and inheritance laws are concerned. The family laws based on religion and customs are the indicators of widows' property rights. Under Sharia Law, a woman is entitled to one eighth of her husband's estate, and half of her male siblings' share of the parent's estate (the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance 1961). But what Islam has given her, the male-dominated society has taken it away. In practice, many Bangladeshi widows, especially those who are illiterate and live in rural areas, are subject to oppressive patriarchal traditions. They are often deprived of their rightful inheritance. According to a recent report conducted by Centre for Dhaka and Children Studies, many rural widows receive nothing from their in-laws and are often victims of violence, evicted from their homes and robbed of their household possessions. A 1995 survey on property inheritance in Bangladesh revealed that only 25 per cent of the widows sampled had received their rightful share from either of their parents, and only 32 per cent from their husbands [4]. The common story is of corruption, exploitation and violence at the hands of the husband's relatives. 48.24 percent of Muslim widows are knowledgeable about Sharia Law which provides them the right to inherit parents' and husband's property. But in practice women are hardly found claiming their rightful share. In the case of widows, it is still harder and sometimes impossible to claim their lawful property rights when they are without any adult male to provide them the

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social and economic support [5]. They would not like to risk disruption of normal relationship with their brothers because in time of crisis, the sister often has to look towards her brothers. Thus, widows lose their rights to property and land, even when a proper application of the law would have protected them.

According to Hindu “Dayabhaga Law”, a widow can enjoy the property in limited interest, that is, during her life time only in the absence of son, grandson and great-grandson. But such share is limited to non-agricultural property except in the Sylhet district where Hindu widow also inherits agricultural land in limited interest. However, in India, the Hindu inheritance law has been changed, while in Bangladesh, it is still the age-old customary and religious laws that regulate the widows’ inheritance of husband’s property.

#### **ii) Access to Employment**

The general state of women’s employment and mobility in rural areas is very depressing and the gender division of labour in our society, along with lack of knowledge and skill, restrict women in seeking gainful employment, particularly destitute widowed women. Widows in rural areas are at the bottom of the pile as regards opportunities for work, whether paid in cash or kind. An appealing picture of economic exploitation of widows is found in rural areas in Bangladesh as widows are poorly remunerated for labour. For the poor illiterate widows, the opportunities for working outside are limited to domestic service, agricultural related work and begging [6]. There are widows in non-farm self-employment as well as wage employment, but income range is so meagre that widows have to work both inside and outside the household for their survival. The poor widows, who have become the heads of households on the death of their husbands, desperately need to earn an income to support their family. But with their lack of or low level of education and skill training, they are unable to find wage work with which they could support themselves and their dependent children.

#### **iii) Remarriage**

A sharp difference regarding the issue of remarriage practices among widows exists between Muslim and Hindu communities. The Koran encourages remarriage after the death of the husband; still the freedom of widows to remarry remains limited. The Bangladesh society also sanctions widow remarriage, remarriages occur all the time but it is not as easy as it may appear. Polygamy is prevalent in Bangladesh. A man may marry the deceased brother’s wife or the widow of some other person but there is discrimination against her [7]. She is given a much lower status than the wife. A widowed woman often has no choice about whom she can marry. In all probability, she will get a partner who already has children from a first marriage. The question of dependent children of the widow, who is a mother also, is the foremost consideration. Men hardly want to marry a widow with children to bear the responsibilities. Also children may create adjustment problems with others in the new household, more so if there are other children from the second husband’s previous marriage. On the other hand, Hindu widows do not remarry, as it is still unacceptable, particularly in rural areas where religious norms and values are retained and further reinforced [8].

#### **iv) Widows and Their Children**

In rural Bangladesh poor widows worry most of all about their children's future: how to feed and clothe them; pay school fees, or find the dowry to marry off a daughter. Withdrawing children from school, sending them to work as domestic servants or sacrificing them to other areas of exploitative child labour, selling female children to early marriages or abandoning them to the streets, are common survival strategies. Even though the children dream to study more, extremely poor economic conditions and the inability to bear the educational expenses are continuously haunting many children to drop out of the schools to take up jobs until widows can access education and income-generating training for themselves and their dependents.

Medicines, special food for a sick husband, and funeral expenses may have depleted the usually available resources leaving many widows in debt or forcing them into increased dependence on exploiting moneylenders. In some communities, children are forced into debt bondage for years as a consequence of the father's death, or are sent to work as cheap labour when they should be enjoying the benefits of education and the experience of childhood happiness, security and play. One of the foremost problems the female children, especially of the widows, face is marrying at an age ranging from 12 to 15. They again become a part of this complicated inescapable cycle and lead lives with the fear of becoming widows.

#### **Way of Life of Widows**

In the life cycle of a woman, widowhood brings about changes in the total way of life and livelihood activities. Widows are stigmatized as being inauspicious and are thus left out from religious ceremonies and social activities. The death of a woman's husband distinguishes her from others in her appearance especially in dress, wearing of ornaments and other forms of adornments associated with marriage, which are unacceptable and prohibited for a woman after becoming a widow. However, these rituals and prohibitions are less pronounced in some rural areas because of the poverty situation that the majority of the widows face, where bare survival is more pressing than anything else. Moreover, the majority of widows are impoverished even before they have been widowed with meagre earnings, very little clothing and minimum food intake [9]. As such, for the large majority of widows, daily diet and clothing deteriorate while participation in family affairs is still significantly high. However, participation in community affairs decreases for the majority of widows of both Muslim and Hindu religious groups.

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### **A Different Kind of Widows in Rural Bangladesh (Tiger Victim's Widows in Bangladesh):**

The Sundarbans, the last habitat of the Royal Bengal Tiger and the largest mangrove forest in the world, has become a major source of livelihood for many poor people in the southwest coastal region of Bangladesh. While collecting firewood, catching fish and gathering honey they are often attacked by tigers and a significant number are killed every year. Their widows are called tiger victim's widows and these widows have become the most vulnerable people of the poor community in the Sundarbans adjacent area. According to local and national newspapers and informal surveys, tigers from the Sundarbans killed over 7000 men over the 18 year period of June 1990 – June 2008 [10].

The widows are generally blamed for their husband's death by family members and others in the society who believe they did not diligently perform the important good-luck rituals while their husbands were in the Sundarbans (such as- not using certain spices, not combing their hair, etc). The widows are ostracized by society and shunned by their in-laws with whom they live often compelling them to leave their marital home to return to their parents' homes. Many have to go to live on the river floodplain or on government property.

These widows cannot remarry; no man will marry them because they are a 'sign of misfortune'. To survive, they catch fish and small shrimp from the rivers and canals helped by their children who do not attend school. The children suffer from severe malnutrition and various waterborne diseases. Young widows sometimes have to resort to prostitution and often become victims to sexual assault and sexually transmitted infections including HIV/AIDS. Most widows own no permanent property; they cannot receive the microfinance service provided by Non-Government Organization (NGOs). Such is the prejudice against widows, local representatives are afraid if they support them, people will not vote for them. Thus, they pass their lives in undignified conditions as the outcasts of the society.

### **World Perspective**

India has the largest recorded number of widows in the world -33 million (10 per cent of the female population compared to only 3 per cent of men) and the number is growing because of HIV/AIDS and civil conflicts [11]. Indian society, like all patriarchal societies, confers social status on a woman through a man; hence, in the absence of a man, she herself becomes a nonentity and suffers a social death. Widow remarriage may be forbidden in the higher castes and remarriage, where permitted, may be restricted to a family member [12]. Thousands of India's widows live in abject poverty and degradation in rural India. Restrictions on residence, dress, diet and social intercourse force a widow to a life in the shadows affecting both her physical and mental health [13].

In Pakistan, destitute widows are reported to be supported by a small pension or Zakat. But, as in India, the allocation system is often corrupt, and the most needy widows are frequently neglected. Furthermore, the Honour Codes oppress all women, with a blanket of silence hiding cruelty; and sometimes imprisonment, or even death, is inflicted on young widows who are suspected to bringing dishonour to the family. Muslim widows, like those in Bangladesh, are also often deprived of their rightful inheritance by a male relative.

African widows, irrespective of ethnic groups, are among the most vulnerable and destitute women in the region. Common to both francophone and anglophone countries in the region is the concept that death does not end a marriage. While the widow may have no rights to ownership of her husband's property, she is usually expected to fulfill obligations towards her deceased husband through her participation in traditional practices. In return, she would be allowed to remain in her home and to have rights to cultivate land. In some African cultures, a widow is expected to move into a "levirate" arrangement with her brother-in-law ("the levir") or other male relative or heir nominated by his family [14]. Many widows resist these practices, which are especially repugnant and also life threatening in the context of AIDS and polygamy. Refusal to comply may be answered with physical and sexual violence.

### **Widows' Perception on Development and Their Future Plan**

Suffering from vulnerable conditions, widows of rural Bangladesh feel the need of government and non-government interventions for social and economic development of women, education and skill development training to be involved to livelihood activities outside the household and change in the societal attitude towards widows. Many widows opine that women's productive role including activities that generate income for the household like paid employment is accorded high priority by widows. In this regard, providing income generating work, credit facilities and skill training have been their priority concerns. The highest frequency of responses from the Muslim widows is for providing income generating work opportunities for widows (27.78%) followed by credit (25%) and skill training (24.07%) [15]. Some widows feel the urgent need for self-reliance by being involved in various self-employed petty business which could be home-based or an outside activity. Among other suggested measures are providing jobs, for example, in garment industries, providing educational facilities, changing the present negative and adverse attitude towards widows, and giving widows the right of ownership of landed property.

Future plan of widows is rather disheartening as a large proportion (78.82%) of rural widows has no future plans [16]. It is either because they are too old or living in extreme poverty that they could not think beyond their immediate needs. However, a few give emphasis on buying land to produce crops and rearing poultry and livestock. At the same time, some of them want to educate their children properly, while a few who have daughters are planning to marry them off.

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### **Roles of Government and Non-government Organizations**

The most unfortunate of all are the government and non-government programmes that should have considered widows as their first priority. But these development organizations have totally ignored them as target group. As such, we found only 5.88 per cent and 20 per cent among Muslim and Hindu widows respectively receive some benefits from such village-based programmes, but after some time they are not very active members of the beneficiary groups (Centre for Women and Children Studies, 2000). But interestingly, nearly half of the widowed women know about such poverty-focused programmes that are undertaken in villages of which they are never a part. In their views and opinions, for enhancing their present distressed socio- economic status, top priorities should be accorded to providing opportunities for income earning, education, skill training, credit facilities which would ultimately make them self-sustainable and uplift their overall status in the family, community and society at large.

### **Some Recommended Strategies**

Now, time has come to give the attention of governments, non-government agencies, the media and civil society organizations to the huge increase in the number of widows across the country. The multiple but often hidden human rights violations experienced by widows and their children in rural areas of Bangladesh are embedded in social, economic, legal, religious, cultural and traditional beliefs and practices. As a result of these beliefs and harmful practices, widows and their children are rendered invisible and subject to numerous human rights violations. The following possible interventions may be made in the following areas for urgent and immediate action to end these violations.

**Public Support:** Direct government intervention is necessary to protect the quality of life of the widows after the death of the husband. In case of the helpless, shelterless and destitute widows, a system of direct transfers in cash and kind (or both) may be introduced. Widow's children should be given top priority by government and non-government organization who are working with children's development issues.

**Property Rights:** Legal intervention is needed in this area. To ensure that the widows can effectively inherit property of the deceased husbands, the system of joint ownership of land inherited by either spouse may be introduced and enforced through enactment/ amendment of existing laws relating to inheritance. In case of Hindu widows, new enactment may be necessary to ensure their rights to deceased husband's land/property.



**Employment Opportunities and Access to Resources:** Access of widows to remunerative employment opportunities can play an effective role in protecting widows from deprivation. Both government and non-government interventions are needed to create employment opportunities for widows. The government can launch special employment schemes for widows. Public action can go a long way to remove handicaps that create barriers against widows' willing to take up employment.

**Change in Social Attitudes:** Profound social changes are needed to address and uproot the problem. Women's organizations can start a movement to remove the root causes of this problem. Actions have to be taken to fight legal battles and social resistance. The determined interventions have to be made in social, economic and legal sectors to improve the marginalized position and status of widows in rural Bangladesh.

### ***Concluding Remarks***

It is high time that this hapless, most vulnerable and deprived group is brought to the focus of attention from the national, regional and international quarters. Not only the elderly widows but widows of all communities, both young and old, should be protected socially and economically. They need to be provided with basic needs which are among their fundamental human rights. They should receive legal protection as individuals and workers. National policies should be formulated on widows. Immediate steps should be taken in support of this group so that they live like normal human beings.

Moreover, when widows band together, organize themselves, make their voices heard, and are represented on decision-making bodies locally, nationally, regionally, and internationally, change will occur. Progress will not be made until widows themselves are the agents of change. Widows' associations must be encouraged and empowered to undertake studies profiling their situation and needs. They must be involved in the design of projects and programs and instrumental in monitoring the implementation and effectiveness of new reform legislation to give them property, land, and inheritance rights; protect them from violence; and give them opportunities for training and employment.

However, much more work is needed to build up the capacity of widows' groups and to educate the United Nations, civil society, governments, and institutions, including the judiciary and the legal profession, on the importance of protecting the human rights of widows and their children in rural Bangladesh.

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