

## WOMEN ALONE: THE PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES OF WIDOWS IN INDIA

PRITHA DASGUPTA

Guest Faculty, Indian Institute of Psychology and Research, St. Joseph's Law College, Bangalore, Karnataka

### ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to draw the picture of the status of female headed households and the pressures that widows in the world face. It is also intended to throw light on the challenges and problems of widows in the current scenario. There is a conspicuous absence of feminist, scholarly writing on widows in India. This paper highlights the need today, to make a paradigmatic shift in our perception, to study the problems encountered by these women.

Research on the elderly—the majority of whom are widowed women—has been undertaken by NGOs. Such work, however, ignores younger widows and widows who do not head households. Even the number of widows, as a percentage of the female population is often unknown. In addition, there is a lamentable dearth of knowledge and reliable data, on widowhood in the context of armed conflict, farmer's suicide and the HIV/AIDS pandemic. It has become apparent that, adequate quantitative and qualitative information is needed to inform and guide policy makers and planners. Data are available more, for the industrialized or more developed countries, than in the developing or least developed states. A lack of reliable hard data is one of the biggest obstacles, to influencing policies and programmes that address the situation of widows.

Methodologies utilized for gathering census data in many developing countries, are often not designed to identify the inequalities inherent in widowhood, or to reveal the unpaid economic contribution, widows of all ages make to society. Widows may in fact be excluded from national censuses because; they are homeless or constantly moving among a number of different households, headed by relatives. Moreover, the poverty experienced by individual widows residing within households, is often hidden, since poverty surveys tend to obscure the inequitable distribution of cash, land and other critical resources, within a family and between households.

From time immemorial, widows have been victims of a patriarchal system, without challenging it. Paule Friere (1993) describes this as a culture of silence among the dispossessed, which perpetuates their oppression. Such oppression denies critical awareness, to respond to their situation and they lack even the basic vocabulary to expose it. Widowhood essentially represents the historical power imbalance, between men and women. Yet, concern about widows worldwide and glaringly in India has almost remained invisible, in the women's movement.

**KEYWORDS:** Trauma of Widows, Patriarchy, Socioeconomic and Socio-Cultural Milieu