

Chapter 73

Impact of Widowhood and Disability Among Elderly

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ABSTRACT

Aging is a natural phenomenon in which widowhood and disability are the major characteristics of concern. The main objective of the chapter is to sift the relationship between widowhood and disability by gender. It examines the factors affecting female elderly with the disability and measures both subjective and objective disabilities. This study is evidenced from the Kerala Ageing Survey (KAS), 2013, with a sample of 7668 elderly in which 58% are females. Three major physical disabilities, namely vision, hearing, and walking, and mental disabilities, such as cognitive impairment and depression, are to be analyzed through the data. Before that, disability trends and prevalence of both India and Kerala by age and sex are closely examined through census figures. It is revealed that elderly women are at risk of many factors compared to their male counterparts. They are vulnerable to multiple disabilities. The prevalence of disability is more among elderly females after the age of 70. The main physical problem of elderly is vision followed by movement and hearing impairment.

INTRODUCTION

Among women, the most disadvantaged are widows. In comparison, the incidence of widowhood differs among males and females. The incidence of widows differs across regions while that of widowers is uniformly low across all regions. Therefore, the ratio of widows to widowers is high everywhere- generally due to men's older age at marriage, shorter life expectancy and higher rates of remarriage. In other words, women have a higher chance of becoming widows than men due to their longer life span and the propensity of men to marry younger women. As they grow old, they would rather dependent on others especially on their children than to become independent. Husbands' education and job are important

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predictors of whether his widow will become poor or will depend on others (Shaw et al., 1997). Moreover, women are likely to be more vulnerable physically as well as psychologically when compared to men (Dhar, 2001). Changes in mental and physical health, morale and social functioning were assessed in a random sample of elderly women widowed during the course of an 8-year study by Wiley (1999). The sample as a whole showed age-related declines in mental and physical health. As a function of ageing, there were increases in personal disturbance and in physical health problems and decreases in both morale and social engagement. Moreover, over and above these age-related changes, widows showed significant changes in mental health. There was a decrease in morale after widowhood, followed by a slight increase in the longer term. Similarly, there was an increase in personal disturbance following widowhood with a slight decrease later. The results confirm that even after several years, widowhood has differential effects on wellbeing and morale (Bennett, 1997). Age of the spouse when her life partner died is a demographic factor which indicates the period of loneliness or isolation from the activities which she is forced to face (Raju, 2002). Depression is the most common mood disorder among the elderly. Older women are likely to face a 'triple jeopardy' - of being women, of being old and of being poor. Standards of living influence the ability to seek good health care and treatment. Proportion of elderly living longer with disabilities required greater amounts of medical expenditure and diminishes the saving of family income (Spillman, 2004). A study by Rajan and Anjana (2017) found that males had a higher proportion of life expectancy that is disability-free than females. The proportion of life expectancy free of disability decreases with age and the proportion of life expectancy spent in a disabled state increases with age. More importantly, among elderly women, especially widows with advanced age, chronic diseases showed a greater risk of disability and functional limitation compared to elderly men.

WIDOWS IN INDIA

According to the Global Report on Widows (2015), India has the highest number of widows in the world. The incidence of widowhood rises sharply with age. According to the 2011 census, total number of widows in India was 43,261,478 and that of widowers was 12,277,229. There are 3524 widows to every 1000 widowers.

Figure 1 explores the changes in the widowhood rate in India that occurred during the inter survey period between 2001 and 2011. The rate has declined for females while there was a slight increase among the males at their later ages. The figure also shows that widowhood started among females at younger ages, though it is not so intense among males. Widowhood rate among males stood at 10 percent between the ages of 65 and 69 years, whereas the same rate is observable among the females between the ages of 45 and 49 years. Thus, it can be concluded that the intensity of widowhood among females started in their early years of life while it started in later years among males.

Among the states of India, Kerala has a significant percentage of widowed population which is followed by Tamil Nadu. Compared to northern states, all southern states have a significant percentage of their population widowed, obviously the result of population ageing.

The sex ratio of both widowed elderly and non-elderly are favourable to females. The sex ratio of Kerala is 262 times higher than the sex ratio of India. Thus, Kerala has a significant proportion of widows as compared to the national level. According to the 2011 census, the proportion of widows in the female population stood at 7.4 percent. Among these, 58.2 percent are elderly widows (Rajan & Sunitha, 2015).

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