

Making and Unmaking the Meaning of Widowhood: A Case Study on Elderly Widows in Post War Jaffna

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Loss and bereavement are an important part of anybody's life. Experience of loss is even more distressing when the death of a person brings additional social stigma. Such is the experience of widowhood in post war Sri Lanka. A common idea about this experience in a country like Sri Lanka is the 'colorless' life a widow is expected to live till the time she breathes on this earth. A widow is stigmatized, feared and segregated from the family and wider society. An elderly widow is at a particular disadvantage, as she has to face discrimination on three grounds – gender, age and widowhood. Given this context, this study, intended to understand the social background of elderly widows.

The main objective of this study is to consider the Common conceptions about widowhood and looking into how different meaning of this experience emerges in post-war Jaffna. Time and again many researchers have tried to get to the basics of understanding widowhood. This paper's primary concern is to fill this gap of doctrinal approach of meaning attribution to widowhood through a qualitative sociological approach on the meaning of widowhood based on real life experiences in post war Jaffna, Sri Lanka. This study makes further attempts to answer the following specific research questions– How do elderly widows construct meaning of their status as widows in post war Jaffna? And do their role, status and experience within the household and family effect creation of such meaning?

This study conducted a qualitative research based on random sampling method. This paper has reported on the experiences of 62 elderly widows. The participants were selected from a list of those who got registered as elderly widows at the divisional secretariat in Jaffna. The selected respondents were using in-depth interviews, non- direct and participant observation and key informant interviews (09) as the ways of collecting primary data through the purposive sampling. The method for the analysis of data is theme analysis based on grounded theory for the analysis of field interviews. The focus of this paper is on elderly widows as they are the ones whom more likely to have grave experience of widowhood on the basis of their gender, age, day to day life events, situations, etc. This preliminary fieldwork pertaining to the topic gave us a sense that not all the widows have attached the same kind of meaning to their widowhood experience. Creation of a; meaning depends on various factors from grief of losing a caring husband to the relief of getting rid of a drunkard husband. Since issue of elderly people have become a central part of the development and social work discourse in the post-war Tamil society, findings through this study can be helpful in developing better understanding of elderly widowhood and what kind of approach and policies need to be formulated to address their issues and grievances.

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