

Widowhood in India*

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In all societies, the loss of the marital partner through death necessarily involves several changes in the financial arrangements and subsequent economic management, and these are even more so if the dead spouse was the primary earner in the family. In general women tend to be worse affected, largely because of the gender construction of society: in almost all societies, men are disproportionately likely to hold assets of all kinds and engage in paid work, relative to women. The well-known gender gaps in occupational distribution and pay add to the discrepancy. So a wide range of patriarchal institutions, most particular patrilineal inheritance, patrilocal residence and the gendered division of labour in a society, which affect all women, also affect widows and make their situation that much more difficult than for widowed men.

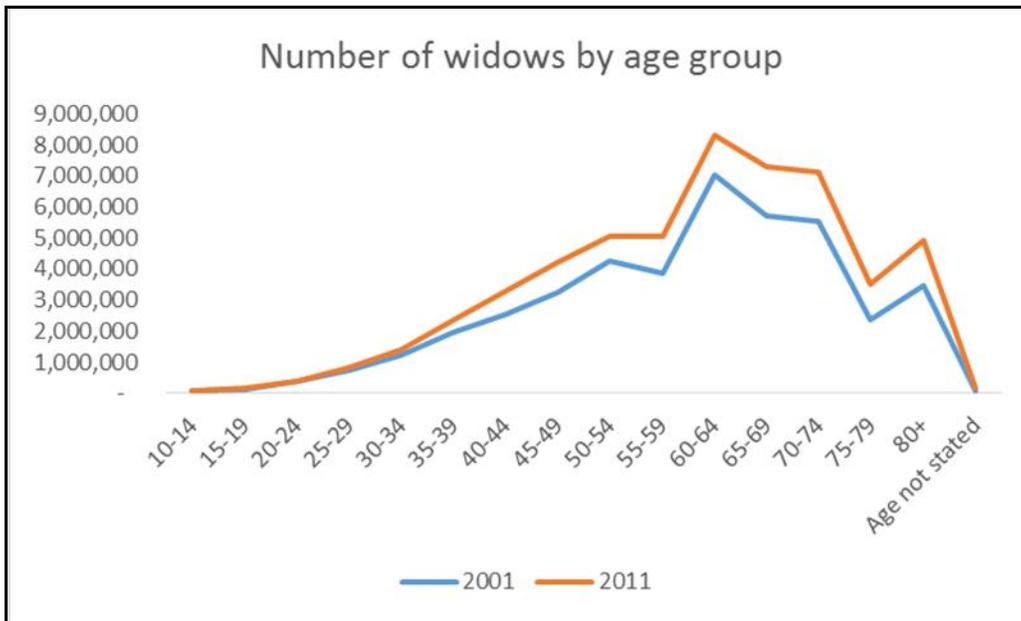
But in India the gender dimensions of this are much stronger than in most other countries – and they affect many more women. There are at least 55 million widows in India, probably more. That is around the same as the entire population of countries like South Africa and Tanzania, more than all the people in South Korea or Myanmar.

It is well known that in India widows tend to face many difficulties and deprivations because of negative social attitudes towards them and social restrictions that are placed upon them and their activities. They are subject to patriarchal customs, religious laws and widespread discrimination in inheritance rights. Many suffer abuse and exploitation at the hands of family members, often in the context of property disputes. Remarriage is much less common than among male widowers, and often explicitly or implicitly forbidden by local communities and prevalent cultural norms. Widows are often perceived as “unlucky” and subject to various kinds of discrimination and even ostracism.

Issues about the division of the marital property and the rights of the widowed over such property, relative to the rights of children, are also significant. In many instances, women are denied automatic rights over the property of the dead spouse, and are therefore forced to rely upon the largesse of inheriting children. In families with less assets and incomes they are also more prone to being abandoned or forced to reside in ashrams and similar refuges, as testified by the well-known presence of widows in Benaras. Among the extremely destitute in India, widows are disproportionately represented.

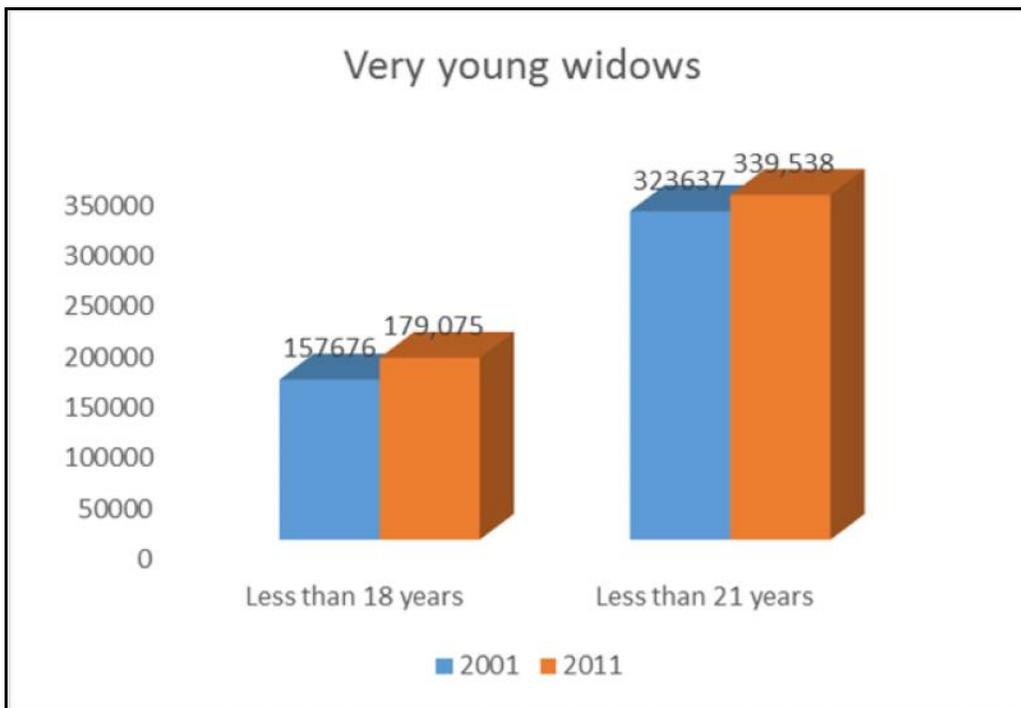
Chart 1 shows that the incidence of widowhood is particularly higher among elder women – and this has increased in the period 2001-2011. This may be unsurprising given the higher life expectancy of women compared to men. But widows are disproportionately represented among the elder population also because male widowers have a higher propensity of remarriage.

Chart 1.



Source: Census of India, 2001 and 2011.

Chart 2.



But widowhood is not confined to older age groups; a significant number of younger women are widowed. In India this is especially marked, as indicated in Chart 2, because of the continued prevalence of child marriage despite it being illegal for girls under the age of 18 years to be married. There were nearly three and a half lakh

widows under the age of 21 years in India in 2011, and more than half of them were under the legal age of marriage of 18 years. It is even more alarming to note that the absolute number of such child widow increased significantly over the decade. The substantial number of child widows gives rise to very specific problems that are at once more acute and more complex than the problems of elderly widows.

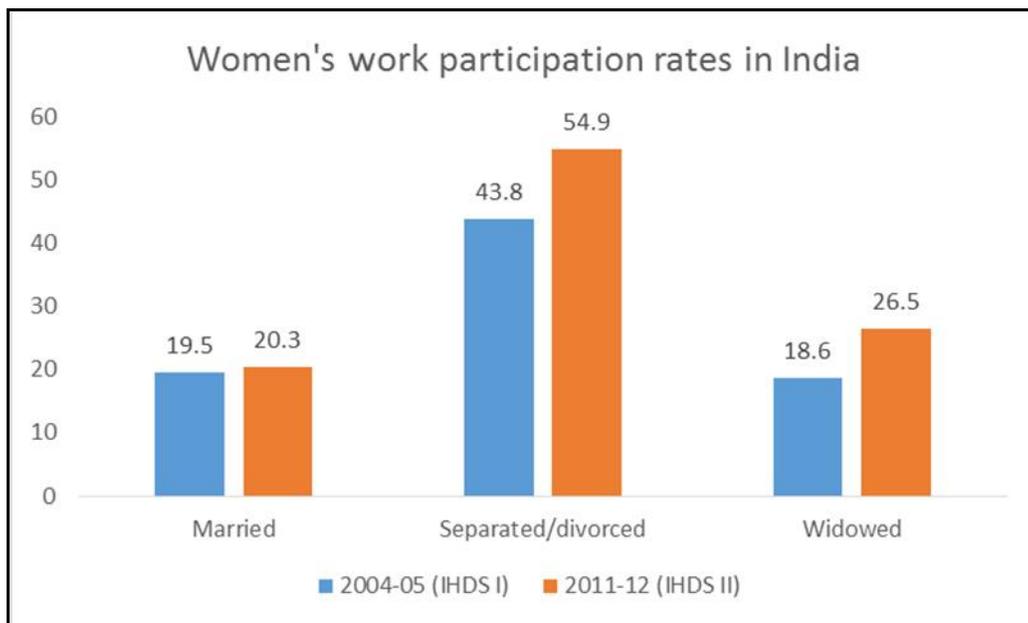
Table 1. Widows by state, 2011.

	Widowed	% of ever married women	% of all widows
Jammu & Kashmir	3,35,136	9.86	0.62
Himachal Pradesh	3,76,019	14.06	0.69
Punjab	11,85,943	11.53	2.19
Chandigarh	29,216	9.08	0.05
Uttarakhand	4,61,189	14.06	0.85
Haryana	9,24,115	11.11	1.70
Nct Of Delhi	5,39,235	10.45	0.99
Rajasthan	25,81,388	10.61	4.76
Uttar Pradesh	59,13,805	9.95	10.91
Bihar	26,02,380	8.60	4.80
Sikkim	19,676	9.45	0.04
Arunachal Pradesh	56,828	10.63	0.10
Nagaland	74,880	10.01	0.14
Manipur	1,05,705	10.98	0.19
Mizoram	56,286	11.02	0.10
Tripura	2,34,116	14.73	0.43
Meghalaya	1,56,899	12.84	0.29
Assam	13,69,011	13.94	2.52
West Bengal	49,90,116	14.05	9.20
Jharkhand	14,90,318	12.61	2.75
Odisha	23,06,416	13.89	4.25
Chhattisgarh	14,25,351	14.10	2.63
Madhya Pradesh	29,38,991	11.09	5.42
Gujarat	24,52,518	11.65	4.52
Daman & Diu	7,934	13.04	0.01
Dadra & Nagar Haveli	13,117	9.95	0.02
Maharashtra	55,21,290	13.66	10.18
Andhra Pradesh	52,71,941	16.11	9.72
Karnataka	37,19,236	16.20	6.86
Goa	89,894	17.96	0.17
Lakshadweep	4,872	13.61	0.01
Kerala	22,42,174	17.91	4.13
Tamil Nadu	46,29,094	16.61	8.54
Puducherry	85,983	18.82	0.16
Andaman & Nicobar Islands	13,491	11.88	0.02
Total India	5,42,24,563	12.84	

Source: Census of India 2011.

Curiously enough, the presence of widowhood varies quite sharply by state, as shown in Table 1. Some southern states (such as Puducherry, Tamil Nadu and Kerala) show disproportionately high rates of ever-married women are widows, even though they do not have higher rates of male mortality. Conversely, states with worse human development indicators like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, show smaller proportions of ever-married women as widows.

Widowhood may generate an increased propensity to participate in paid work. Data from the Indian Human Development Surveys suggest that there has been an increase in women's work participation rates for women with dissolved marriages between 2004-05 and 2011-12. The increase was the greatest among separated and divorce women, but it was also substantial among widows, while it remained almost stagnant among married women.



Overall, public policy has largely ignored the specific problems of widows in India. But given the numbers involved, this exclusion is likely to prove costly not just for the women concerned but for society in general.

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