

## Depression and Widowhood: An Empirical Analysis in Bihar

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Widowhood is a critical problem that impacts women worldwide. It is closely associated with poverty and a major impediment to accomplishing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations. It is gauged that there are 40 million widows in India, which accounts for 10% of the nation's female population. The experience of widowhood in India differs across socio-economic classes, customs, religions, traditions, and periods. The objective of this study was to capture the intensity of depression among widows as compared to married women and compare the magnitude of depression based on their employment status.

**Methodology:** A group of 80 widows and an equal number of married women were selected employing a purposive sampling technique. Also, they were equally divided into working and non-working. A standard PDS and a Hindi translation of Beck's Depression Inventory by Kushwaha were used to assess the magnitude of depression among widows.

**Result:** The result suggests that widows report higher levels of depression compared to married women. It was also observed that different groups of women, viz working widows, non-working widows, working married women, and non-working married women, differed significantly between themselves in terms of intensity of depression.

**Conclusion:** Thus, women's levels of depression were significantly influenced by both their marital status and employment, with non-working widows experiencing the highest levels of depression, followed by working widows, while married women—both working and non-working—experience lower levels of depression due to the psychological benefits of marital support, employment, and social engagement. Therefore, it is recommended that there is a need for social support networks and economic opportunities for widows to improve their mental health outcomes.

**Keywords:** Women, Widowhood, Employment and Depression

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### INTRODUCTION

Marriage and widowhood are two significant life events that can profoundly impact an individual's life. Marriage is a legally acknowledged and often ceremonious union between two people, generally based on love and mutual responsibility. It involves sharing responsibilities and emotions and building a life together as a married couple. The disruption of marriage or widowhood, due to the death of the spouse, is a source of significant emotional discomfort and stress. Depending on gender, the individuals concerned are called widows (female) or widowers (male).

Losing an intimate partner is one of the most probable biographical turning points in people's lives. The death of a spouse impacts in various ways the everyday life, health, well-being, and social relations of the surviving spouse. To better understand the short and long-term impact of the loss of a spouse, Bennett, and Soulsby's research distinguish between widowhood and bereavement. In his words, while widowhood refers primarily to the new socio-economic status and its impact, spousal bereavement relates to the status of mourning after the loss of the spouse [1]

Widowhood is a critical issue that affects women worldwide. It is directly linked to poverty and is a significant barrier to achieving the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [2]. Widowhood and poverty (SDG 1) are directly related in some regions of the globe by disinheritance, prejudice, and harmful behaviours that widows face; nevertheless, widowhood is also indirectly and directly linked to most of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [2]. These include human trafficking (SDG 8), extremism (SDG 10), shelter (SDG 11), inadequate education (SDG 4), food insecurity (SDG 2), poor health (SDG 3), HIV/AIDS (SDG 3), child marriage (SDG 5), child widowhood (SDG 5), and lack of access to justice (SDG 16) [2].

The Global Fund for Widows is an organization that aims to address the widowhood epidemic and secure widows' rights worldwide [2]. They contend that without defending widows' rights, we cannot accomplish the Agenda 2030 SDGs. Three primary rights breaches face widows in developing nations: being disinherited, facing prejudice, and being subjected to harmful practices [2]. Due to these transgressions, they are unable to receive government benefits, justice, and items brought into or donated during their marriage, among other things that are rightfully theirs [2]. Widows are also subjected to social stigma, shame, and taboo and are often subjected to cleansing rites, including cutting and scarring, and intense sexual violence [2].

The status of a person who was lawfully married to someone who passed away is known as widowhood. In India, there are 5.6 crore widows, according to the 2011 census [3]. Women make up a larger proportion of widows than males do, making up around 78% of the total. 89.71 lakh widows were added between 2001 and 2011 [4]. With 7,539,857 widows, Uttar Pradesh is the state with the most widows, according to the 2011 Indian Census. However, if we consider the percentage of the widowed/ divorced population, Tamil Nadu has the highest percentage of widowed/divorced women in India [5]. Ten percent of India's female population, or 40 million widows, are thought to be widowed. In India, widowhood has many meanings depending on historical periods, customs, religions, and socioeconomic level [6].

The widows may also be seen from the standpoint of age groups, according to Census statistics. Child widows, defined as widows with children aged 10 to 19, make up 0.45% of all widows. According to the 2011 Census of India, 9.0% of people are between the ages of 20 and 39, 32% are between the ages of 40 and 59, and 58% are over 60 [7]. Depending on their age, widows encounter unique difficulties with regard to lost youth, job opportunities, skill enhancement, property rights, housing, and medical care [8]. Furthermore, the fact that there are 1.94 lakh child widows in India even after the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act of 2006 raises serious concerns [9].

As the number of widows rises, so does the perception of widowhood. Widows are increasingly becoming more accepted in society, taking up professions, going to events and ceremonies, and no longer being suppressed under the guise of widowhood. However, owing to the prejudice and customary penalties of the community against widows, there are regions of the nation where being a widow is even more painful and humiliating for women than for widowers. In certain places, widows still face social constraints on living arrangements, limited work options, unstable property rights, limited ability to marry, and a lack of social support. Their issues are little understood, and the overall plans are inadequate to address them and enhance their circumstances. In addition, there is little information available on their financial circumstances to identify the widows' most marginalised and vulnerable groups. Although widows are counted in the census, but there are no reliable analytical studies on the condition of widows and the obstacles they encounter in obtaining social security and other supports for empowerment.

The government has launched a number of initiatives in an effort to address the unique situation faced by widows. Numerous state administrations have developed programs for widow remarriage. Additionally, state governments have developed programs to help widows marry their daughters and provide pensions to them. Special arrangements have been developed under MNREGA to identify widowed women who meet the requirements to be considered a household and receive 100 days of labour following death.

Over the past two years, the Union Ministry of Women and Child Development has focused on addressing issues faced by widows. One major challenge for widows is navigating through various offices to claim their benefits after their husband's passing. Delays often occur because they struggle to provide the required documentation of their husband's death. To guarantee that the widow's name is required to be stated on a man's death certificate, the Ministry has launched a specific campaign in collaboration with the state

governments. Considering these conditions, a new widows' shelter house with accommodations for 1000 widows is being built in Vrindavan, Uttar Pradesh [10]. This is the most well-known widow's home that the government has built or is funding. It is a different kind of home since widows may study and grow here, acquiring skills that help them make the most of their time. Widows are given a fresh start at the shelter house. Widows are highlighted specifically in the newly released Draft National Policy for Women as a unique group in need of support, care, and safety.

The Loomba Foundation offers extensive statistics on widows globally and per nation. The study draws upon data from national demographic surveys and censuses as well as information gathered from the UN database [11]. As to the statistics, there are 258,481,056 widows in the world. A breakdown of widows by area is also included in the study. According to the Loomba Foundation [12] (2015), the regions with the greatest proportion of widows are East Asia and Pacific, South Asia, and Europe/Russia. The survey also shows that, with 46,457,516 widows worldwide, India leads China, which has 44,590,560 widows [12].

**Depression:** A frequent mental illness called depression manifests as a mood of sadness, lack of interest or pleasure, guilt or poor self-esteem, interrupted sleep or eating, low energy, and difficulty concentrating. An individual's capacity to do daily chores may be significantly impaired by these issues if they develop into chronic or recurrent issues. Worse still, sadness can result in suicide, a terrible death that claims over 850,000 lives annually [13]. One of the leading causes of disability in the globe, depression is generally documented to create greater degrees of functional impairment and discomfort in older adults.

Feeling sad, blue, unhappy, wretched, or hopeless can all be associated with depression. For brief periods of time, most of us have experienced this at some point. True clinical depression is a type of mood disorder characterised by protracted periods of grief, loss, rage, or frustration that interfere with day-to-day functioning [14].

Widowhood can significantly impact the lives of those who experience it. According to a recent study, widowhood is perhaps the most distressing and challenging experience of people's lives [15]. The psychological consequences of widowhood can include depression, anxiety, loneliness, and a sense of isolation [16]. A study found that widowhood is primarily a late-life experience, with more than three-quarters of all widowed persons aged 65 or older. The study also showed that widowhood had a more significant negative impact on men's psychological health than it did on women's [17]. It's crucial to remember that, whereas widowhood has a strong depressive effect on older males, it has no effect on women and only partially explains variance in depressed symptomatology [17]. This implies that most people—women especially—adapt rather well over time.

Research has indicated that those who are married possess several benefits compared to singles, including enhanced physical and mental health, greater functioning, higher self-rated health, and longer lifespans [18, 19, 20]. However, widowhood can lead to economic insecurity, discrimination, stigmatization, and harmful traditional practices based on marital status [20]. Cross-sectional research conducted among older persons in India revealed that widowhood was not generally related with any outcomes for males, with the exception of cognitive capacity. In contrast to married males, men who were bereaved within a four-year period had a higher risk of diabetes [18]. Furthermore, even after controlling for other explanatory factors, women who had recently lost a spouse or who had been widowed for an extended period had higher odds of psychological distress, lower self-rated health, and hypertension [18].

In contrast, women widowed 5–9 years were not, compared to married women [18]. Gender, the duration of widowhood, and the type of outcome are relevant when assessing widowhood's potential to negatively impact health [18]. Individuals handle widowhood differently, especially depending on their gender. Many men and women look for new friendships or marriages to bridge the gap left by the loss of their spouse. Some people start to become more invested in their jobs, kids, or grandkids. Some people give their time to philanthropic and religious institutions. Others seek solace in local support groups or via counselling. Women may find it easier to deal with the emotional challenges of widowhood than males since they are often socialised to be emotionally expressive; nonetheless, they frequently face financial difficulties.

Widowhood often leads to psychological distress, including depression. Studies have found that widows in India face unique socio-cultural challenges that exacerbate their mental health issues. A study by Chen and Dreze [21] highlights that widowhood in rural India often leads to social isolation, economic hardship, and reduced access to healthcare, which can heighten depressive symptoms. Similarly, Agarwal and Prasad [22]

found that widows experience higher levels of depression compared to married women, primarily due to the loss of social and financial support.

The mechanisms underlying these correlations are poorly understood, despite the repeated reports of a negative impact on health and survival after divorce or widowhood [23]. According to Amato's Divorce-Stress-Adjustment Perspective, going through a divorce raises stresses, which raise the likelihood of emotional, behavioural, and physical issues. The danger, which may be short- or long-term, may vary depending on personal traits and situations. According to this paradigm, psychological distress—which can result from both financial and emotional difficulties and have a negative impact on one's health—is a crucial intermediate effect of divorce or bereavement [24].

### Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of the study are to find out the intensity of depression among widows and compare them with a group of married women. Further, the study also aims to compare the magnitude of depression based on their employment status.

**Hypothesis:** A few hypotheses were formulated based on literature review:

- Widows would be more likely to experience higher levels of depression than married women.
- Women's levels of depression will be significantly influenced by both their marital status and employment.

## METHODOLOGY

### Sample

A group of 80 widows and an equal number of married women were sampled using purposive sampling. The selected respondents belonged to two districts in the Bhagalpur division of Bihar—Banka and Bhagalpur district. All the respondents were between 30 and 50 years of age and belonged to middle-class families. Further, they were equally divided into working and non-working women. Selected women respondents were also comparable in terms of their educational status, family background, and inhabitation.

### Tools used

- **Personal Data Sheet:** A personal data sheet developed by researcher was used to capture personal and biographical information. This includes age, marital status, education, employment status, family status, inhabitation etc.
- **Depression Inventory:** A Hindi translation of Beck's Depression Inventory [25] by Kushwaha [26] was used to assess the magnitude of depression among widows. The original inventory consists of 21 items, while Hindi translated inventory consists of 16 items. There are at least four different, varying-intensity response options for every question. Respondents were allowed to select the statement that best reflected the range of intensities of their thoughts. Each item's response score falls between 0 and 3, while the total scale spans 0 and 48. The score range of 0–5 represents "Normal," 6–10 represents "Mild Mood Disturbances," and 11–13 represents "Borderline Clinical Depression." Depression is categorized as "Moderate" in cases 14–19, "Severe" in cases 20–30, and "Extreme" in cases 31 and above. The content validity of the Hindi questions is 0.67, while the computed internal consistency (reliability) is 0.86.

## RESULTS & DISCUSSION

**H1:** Widows would be more likely to experience higher levels of depression than married women, regardless of their working status, due to the emotional impact of losing a spouse.

**Table 1: Comparison of mean depression score of widows and married women**

Groups	N	Mean	SD	SE Mean	t-value	F ratio
Widows	80	26.09	7.38	.83	18.63**	32.54**
Married women	80	8.75	3.84	.43		

Note: NS= Not significant, \*= Significant at .05 level, and \*\*= Significant at .01 level.

A closer observation of Table 1 revealed that the mean depression score for widows ( $26.09 \pm 7.38$ ) is significantly higher than that of married women ( $8.75 \pm 3.84$ ). Further, the mean depression score of widows falls under the category of 'severe,' whereas married women are categorized under 'mild mood disturbance.' This suggests that widows report higher levels of depression compared to married women, which is consistent with the hypothesis. The t-value (18.63) is very high, indicating that the difference in depression levels between widows and married women is statistically significant at the 0.01 level. The F ratio is also highly significant (32.54). This further supports the hypothesis that widows are more likely to undergo higher levels of depression.

Previous studies also confirm that widows reported higher levels of depression than married women [27-29]. Thapa and others [30] explored that widowed and divorced women reported higher levels of depression compared to married women. The study highlighted those widowed women face greater emotional distress due to the loss of companionship and social stigma associated with widowhood. These findings highlight that the loss of a spouse is a key factor contributing to emotional distress. They also highlighted how factors such as social isolation and financial insecurity compounded the mental health challenges faced by widows.

**H2:** Women's levels of depression will be significantly influenced by both their marital status and employment.

**Table 2: Comparison of different groups of widows and married women and their relative feeling in terms of their magnitude of depression**

Groups	N	M	SD	SE Mean	t-ratio			F Value		
					B	C	D	B	C	D
A	40	20.25	3.95	0.62	11.59**	19.34**	11.27**	2.33 (NS)	12.71**	4.17*
B	40	31.93	4.99	0.79	X	20.45**	22.28**	X	20.78**	11.31**
C	40	6.08	2.51	0.39	X	X	8.68**	X	X	1.23 (NS)
D	40	11.43	2.99	0.47	X	X	X	X	X	X

Note: A=Working widows, B= Non-working widows, C= Working married women, D= Non-working married women, NS= Not significant, \*= Significant at .05 level, and \*\*= Significant at .01 level.

Table 2 presents the summary of statistical findings of women in terms of their marital status and employment. It is apparent that different groups of women, viz working widows, non-working widows, working married women, and non-working married women, differed significantly between themselves in terms of intensity of depression. Further, non-working widows have the highest depression scores ( $M = 31.93$ ), which is categorized as 'extreme depression', followed by working widows' 'severe' depression ( $M = 20.25$ ), non-working married women 'borderline clinical depression' ( $M = 11.43$ ) and working married women 'mild mood disturbance' ( $M = 6.08$ ) (Figure 1). The result suggests that both marital status and employment significantly influence depression levels among women. Based on the t-ratio and F-values, there are strong and statistically notable differences between the groups.

These findings support earlier research findings obtained by Chen and Dreze [21], Agarwal and Prasad [22], and Patel and others [31], who recorded that the loss of spousal support and societal stigmatization are key factors that contribute to the poor mental health of widows. They also concluded that employed widows have better mental health outcomes than their non-working counterparts due to the psychosocial benefits of work.

## CONCLUSION

Thus, women's levels of depression were significantly influenced by both their marital status and employment, with non-working widows experiencing the highest levels of depression, followed by working widows, while married women—both working and non-working—experience lower levels of depression due to the psychological benefits of marital support, employment, and social engagement. This analysis confirms that widows face a higher emotional burden, as hypothesized, and may require targeted mental health support. Therefore, it is recommended that there is a need for social support networks and economic opportunities for widows to improve their mental health outcomes.

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