

**International
Institute of
Social Studies**

The logo consists of the word "Erasmus" written in a stylized, cursive black font.

**Lived Experiences and Social Relations of Power:
Young Widows in Urban Trivandrum, Kerala**

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*“For my beloved Ajit,
Who lived a short span with zest,
And left me with a quest....
He bid me step into the storm
But reach for the crest....
So, herein is my paean
Dedicated to him.”*

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List of Acronyms

BPL	Below Poverty Line
CDS	Center for Development Studies
ISS	Institute of Social Studies
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
PDS	Public Distribution system
SEWA	Self Employed Women's Association

Abstract

Death is an inescapable reality of life. It is always shocking and often traumatic when our beloved ones depart from our life. This paper aims to analyze the deprivations of young widows in urban Trivandrum, Kerala and their experiences as a result of the painful transition from wife to widowhood. The transformation that a conjugal bereavement brings to someone often leads him/her to a crossroad. Like in any patriarchal dominated society, married women in most households in Kerala are under the protection of their husband. He is usually the main breadwinner and provides the economic and social security for his wife and children. In the sudden absence of her spouse, besides encountering an unexpected shock, a widowed woman undergoes a radical life altering path. It leaves her with high instability in terms of economic, emotional, physical and social well-being which is an often neglected issue in Kerala despite the high social indicators for women.

The aim of the thesis is to understand the lived experiences of a few young widows with children and the challenges they face in coping up and living a fulfilling a good human life. A qualitative study based on narratives with eighteen young widows was conducted using unstructured interviews. In an effort to understand the coping mechanisms and negotiations around the normative restrictions on widows and ways in which widows' express their agency; concepts of gender, sexuality and agency have been used. The paper concludes by examining their lives based on the broader normative framework of Nussbaum's capability approach with a view to shaping public policy.

Relevance to Development Studies

One of the key challenges for both researchers and policy makers has been to address the issues that lead to marginalization and stigmatization of vulnerable groups. It is thus a pressing need to research on matters relating to the basic fundamental rights and gender inequality faced by the widows who are often subject to various forms of discrimination, neglect and suppression. If a concerted action by the government, policy makers, community and religious organizations and NGOs are taken into account, at both regional and national level, the vulnerabilities faced by the widows can be mitigated and they are made more visible. This study contributes to the ongoing debate on the Kerala model and the gender paradox.

Keywords

Widows, Widowhood, Women, Gender, Sexuality, Agency, Capabilities, Kinship, Property rights, Patriarchy

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 My Journey

I was born a girl child in a middle class Hindu family in Kerala, a southern state of India. Like most other girls in my city, I too was brought up to believe that I would study and later be 'happily' married and settled. The higher my educational qualification, more prospective would be the groom. Girls in my family were rarely ever permitted to move away from hometowns for graduate studies. Alliances started pouring in as I turned eighteen. Marriage after graduation or post- graduation was the norm. My parents like most Hindu Nair families, wanted me to settle down in marriage. But growing up as a pampered younger sibling to a brother who was granted more freedom sparked a rebellious streak and the rebel within me wanted to leave home and get the exposure that was afforded to my brother. I insisted that I go as well, and finally I did. Upon completion of my Post graduate diploma in Journalism and Communication, I was asked to return to my natal home. For fear of getting into an arranged marriage, I applied for and landed a job away from my home state.

The job demanded travel and it was in one such train journey I met a fellow traveler who piqued my interest. My soon to-be husband was Captaining a Merchant Ship and was from a Christian family. I specify both our religions here, since inter-faith marriages were and are still uncommon in Kerala. For the same reason, this alliance was highly unacceptable to both families initially. My courage to be bold and assertive was, according to some distant relatives, the result of getting 'too much exposure'. I made it clear that I was against arranged marriages, as I always saw the system as some sort of a business deal; it's like saying I like that flower and I want it, without knowing anything more about it. After a lot on convincing and with the families' blessings we were finally married. My husband and I were equals in our marriage and that assertion was made simply by choosing not to change my maiden name as is the norm.

Life was more like living a fairy-tale world; sailing the seven seas; travelling to distant lands; living life to the fullest; blessed with and welcomed a son but never pausing or allowing a change to that gypsy spirit. Into the seventh year of our marriage my life took a tragic turn – I watched my husband die in an accident. Within an instant, as per the societal standards, I became a 'widow'. My son was only 4 1/2 years old then. As the grief settled and I started to pick up the pieces of my life, I was suddenly unsure of my own identity. Somewhere along, growing up being groomed to be a good and educated home-maker, getting married and having a family I had subconsciously accepted that I was an extension of my husband's identity. Now I was arriving at the conclusion that without a man there was no security in a woman's life. I remember telling my father-in-law that I wanted my name changed from my maiden name and add my

husband's name in the end. To me it was a matter of having an identity; of belonging somewhere or rather belonging to someone.

A women's identity says Ahmed H, is molded by the institution of marriage. From the time immemorial her status in society is defined by "controls over her sexuality" and once her husband dies, and her identity as wife is terminated, it then is redefined by the patriarchal norms of the society (2009: 26). The day came when my parents told me they would take me back to their home, as per the norms. I believe it was the freedom and courage I gained while I was young by living independently that I was able to take a decision myself and I decided to remain with my in-laws. For me, my parents did not lose their daughter but for my in-laws they lost their only son, my sisters in law lost their only brother. So my decision to remain with my in-laws was welcomed.

I was only thirty-three and I was considered fairly good looking. People who knew my circumstance started to look at me with sympathy. I was told by many that I should consider remarriage for long term security and stability. I realized that though remarriage was not a taboo, most women opted out of it. I did toy with the idea of settling down again but my assumptions of the society viewing me unfavorably, especially with a son, laid those ideas to rest. And if, once again, I did decide to go against the norms, what were my avenues to find a suitable person? Am I allowed to openly date, openly step out of home without fear of crude remarks? Am I allowed to sit in a café alone and have coffee? To watch a movie in a theatre by myself? The answer was a plain NO. And I was suddenly reminded of my favorable arguments with friends in my husband's presence as to how progressive our state and its people supposedly were.

Today, I find myself at the crossroads yet again. The young rebel that made me leave home then, decided to do the same once again, but this time carefully and strategically; having to convince a lot more people that I was not running away from the responsibility of taking care of my son, but taking life by my hands and choosing to live the way I want and give a beautiful future to my son. I believe one can do this only when one is able to make their own choices and be at peace with it. I left India, leaving my son in a boarding school for two years, to pursue my dream of doing a Masters in development studies at International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), The Hague.

Being a widow made me reflect on a lot of issues and constraints which young widows are going through in my society. I felt the need to be reflective in my analysis of the trials and tribulations of what many other young widows of urban Trivandrum undergo. I discovered that there was a lot written about elderly widows in Kerala but hardly any article on the young widows. I saw a gap- the quiet deprivations experienced by young widows with children - hardly touched upon. Through this paper, I take my readers through a journey of my experiences with

eighteen young widows in Trivandrum. To begin with, it is important to first comprehend the contextual and historical background.

1.2 Contextual Background: Kerala – God’s Own Country, the ‘Kerala Model’ and the Gender Paradox

Kerala, with its sweeping paddy fields, dense foliage of coconut trees, its hills, valleys, rivers, and backwaters, lies along the south west tip of the Indian Peninsula enveloped by the Arabian sea on the west and the Western Ghats on the east.

The home state is an enigma steeped in traditions and spiritualism. Long before colonization by the British, Kerala maintained a matrilineal system. One possible reason, as may be read from various sources, was the need for soldiers and the uncertainty of life in the chosen profession. In order for the family to manage the various ancestral and acquired properties, the inheritance was traced down the female line. Women started to remain at their natal homes as the men went off to war and their children began inheriting their mother’s property (Jeffrey 1992). Secondly Namboodiris¹ who followed patriarchal traditions, wanted to keep their property untouched through their eldest son and marrying them to a Namboodiri woman. The remaining sons were allowed or encouraged to have sexual union with Nair women so that their children will inherit the property from the maternal side. The matrilineal system or the *marumakkathayam*, as it is called in Kerala, was “established from north to south by the 14th Century” (Jeffrey 1992: 25).

Present day Kerala was formed in 1956 by the unification of the princely states of Malabar, Cochin and Travancore. Travancore state was the wealthiest of the three and by the 19th century was drawn to the world economy (Jeffrey 1992). The Travancore state was unexceptionally progressive and emphasized the role of women. This also meant that the ruler’s children did not inherit the property but their sister’s children did (Jeffrey 1992). Women from the matrilineal system enjoyed an autonomy and position which was quite unusual during those times. The families were not ruled by women but the system meant that the society did not stigmatize women in any way even when they went about in public, speak to men and show initiative towards them (Jeffrey 2004).

In the old Kerala society, families lived in a *tharavad*² where whilst the women had full rights in the house, the eldest male member known as the *karnavar*³ controlled and dominated

¹Namboodiris are known as the upper caste Hindu Brahmins who held a dominating power over all the other religions. They also had an upper hand in all matters related to education, politics and society. They are highly patriarchal by nature.

²An undivided Hindu joint family where everyone was entitled to own properties

³ The senior most maternal uncle in the *tharavad* house who managed the *tharavad* and all major decisions were taken with his consent.

the household. With matrilineal inheritance being an established norm, having a girl child was a favorable event and ensured the continued lineage of family. Her choice to study as much or more than a boy was also welcomed in the homes (Erwer 2003). Also, the generational privilege of power was in effect giving a powerful influence or upper hand for the senior member of the family.

Though domination was by the *karnavar*, the senior most female member of the joint family was considered as the head of the family. It should also be noted that the matrilineal system was not practiced by the dominant Nair⁴ caste alone but also amongst a number of other castes and communities in Kerala. Modernization and colonization brought about a change in the system of matrilineal practice in Kerala. In 1830, the British brought in rigid laws whereby the property could be divided only with the consent of each of the member of the *tharavad*. By the late 19th century, there was a large increase among the members of the *tharavad* (Jeffrey 2004). By 1976, the matrilineal system was completely stopped with the abolition of the Kerala Joint Hindu family system Act (Jeffrey 2004).

1.2.1 Kerala Model

The Kerala Model is a socio- economic model formed in the early 20th century by the communist party of India. Despite the low economic growth in Kerala, other indicators like social, health and education was almost at par with any developed economies in the world. I bring in the high indicator on education, especially among women, as they have a much higher rate of literacy compared to the rest of the women in India. This dates back to the matrilineal system during the pre-independence era which prioritized education for girls. Travancore was in the forefront of the educational drive followed by Cochin and Malabar states. Although upper caste Hindus and Syrian Christians dominated the schools, by the end of 19th century efforts of leaders of lower castes also contributed in expanding the literacy rate throughout Kerala (Jeffery 1992).

One of the most notable aspects of the matrilineal system was the education that women received. Even in the 1800's women had the freedom to study and be gainfully employed. Despite not being able to rule the house because of the importance of the *Karnavar*, they were able "to exercise some influence over the money they earn and the domestic conditions in which they live" (Jeffrey 2004: 658). Their position was far superior to their counter parts in the rest of India. As has been pointed out, these legacies and the positioning of women under the matrilineal system has definitely "produced Kerala's unusual politics and development" (Jeffery 2004: 660).

⁴ Known as warriors of Kerala, land owners and who enjoyed a high status. Followed matrilineal in old Kerala ((Jeffery R 1992: 229).

1.2.2 Gender Paradox

The Kerala Model exposes two paradoxes – a development paradox and a gender paradox. With regards to the ‘development paradox’, what it means is Kerala is known for its high level of human development in contrast to the state’s low economic performance (Erwer 2003). I talk specifically here on gender since my study is dealing mainly with gender issues. The paradox here implies that women, in spite of the high status received in education and freedom to work, are still invisible in the public sphere compared to their male counterpart. Their participation in public field is not seen so desirable by the family members (Erwer 2003). A woman’s autonomy and control remains within a limited sphere. The major decisions are being made by the male members of the family.

The high qualification received by them is mainly seen as enabling them to get a prospective groom in marriage or to be able to make them “good tutors at home for their children” (Erwer 2003: 132). Their level of participation and agency in the public and political sphere in the development process is completely absent in this model (Erwer 2003). Erwer is right in saying that “gender relations were never included on the political agenda in the Kerala Model” (2003: 15).

1.3 Historical Background of Widows in Kerala

Historically, the concept of widowhood did not exist in Kerala, says a well-known communist leader to Martha Chen during her first visit to Kerala (2000: 180). The reasons can be gathered from the pre-independence concept of marriage system in Kerala. Marriages among Nairs were not legalized. The system of *sambandam*⁵ gave her the freedom to choose or to leave the relationship as and when she desired. This was of course allowed with the consent of her *karnavar* or the senior female head of the *tharavad*, but it did not require any explanation to the man whatsoever. By *sambandam*, a woman could either continue to stay in her natal home and have her partner visit her, or she could choose to stay at his place as long as she chooses. Upon choosing to leave him or upon his death, she would return home. The concept of a monogamous marriage came about when the laws became more rigid and the system of marriage was legalized (Jeffery 1992).

The dissolution of the joint Hindu family system by 1976, gave far lesser capabilities for women than men, “yet it forced choices on them as well” (Jeffery 1992: 49). Amongst Christians, as has been pointed out, the protestant missions had a huge impact in bringing down the position of women (Jeffery 1992). The lineage for them was passed down through males as specified in the Travancore Christian Succession Act, 1916. Women were dependent on their

⁵ When a Nair girl was old enough, either a Nair or a Brahmin man could give a piece of cloth to her to form a union whereby he was allowed to visit her regularly at her house. The children of such union belonged to the girl’s natal home and they inherited the maternal property.

husbands and upon his death, they were dependent on their in-laws. These practices made women more subordinate and less assertive towards their rights (Jeffery 1992: 98). There were many changes in laws during the colonial and post-colonial period which undermined the matrilineal system and the system of marriage.

Most of the legal and social reforms grounded marriage and created the system of patrilocal families (Kodoth and Eapen 2005). The changes in the legal reforms still allowed Hindu women the right to share of property at her natal home but their rights were “achieved within a legal framework of dependence on men as husbands” (Kodoth and Eapen 2003: 236). During the beginning of the 20th century, as against the matrilineal families which did not recognize conjugal family, an array of “legislations introduced measures ‘recognizing’ the conjugal family” (Kodoth and Eapen 2003: 236). Legislation also brought about certain rules in the property rights among the patrilineal groups like the Christians and Brahmins (Kodoth and Eapen 2003). The struggle to get equal rights for women within religious laws has continued.

1.4 Statement of the Problem

According to 2011 census, there has been an increase in the number of widows since 2001 and widowed people, mainly female alone, represent more than 44 million in the country (Census India 2011). At an average, Kerala has a higher proportion (10%) of widows compared to the rest of India (Mohindra et al. 2012: 1). The reason can be related to the demographic factors and a remarkable age gap between the couple. Women in Kerala, unlike in the north, “are known for their elevated status” and unlike the northern part of India, less has been talked about the social vulnerabilities faced by widows in general (Mohindra et al. 2012: 2). Also in Kerala, widows are seen more as a “private matter rather than a social problem” (Mohindra et al. 2012: 1).

Being a widow in Kerala brings a lot more constraints due to the social stigma and marginalization stemming from the patriarchal domination that has come about post-independence. This dominance makes a widowed woman undergo an invisible silence of pain. Despite the state’s claim of progressive public policies providing support for socially vulnerable groups, not much has been done to support a good standard of living for a widow with small children (Mohindra et al. 2012).

1.5 Research Objective and Questions

The primary objective of this thesis is to investigate the experiences and the cultural dynamics attached to widowhood. It also investigates the ways in which the [real-life] lived experiences of these young women on aspects related to gender, sexuality, kinship relations, economic resource, and freedom and mobility. This thesis aims to address a gap in discussions on young widows in Kerala, both in terms of academic literature and policy.

Based on this objective, my primary research question asks;

‘What are the lived experiences of young widows in Kerala and how do they cope with socio economic pressures and negotiate social relations in the community, family and in their personal relations?’

Sub questions:

1. What are the challenges they face as widows in relation to family, community and society?
2. How do these young women give meanings and expression to their own personhood (well-being/social life/sexuality)?
3. What kind of social protection or social security is provided to them?

1.6 Methodology

1.6.1 Field work: Qualitative Methods Based on Personal Narratives

The main aim of this research was to collect individual narratives of young widows and their lived experiences. Research method was qualitative interview combining

- a) Life story techniques and
- b) Feminist narratives

For this methodological approach, I used the approach elaborated by R. Sosulski's on 'life History and Narrative Analysis' (Sosulski 2010). According to Sosulski, the advantage of combining feminist narratives with life story techniques is that it gives a reflection of women's opinion. It does not give any predetermined outcomes; neither does it give a fixed finding. Rather, it entitles the respondents' interpretations of their true experience and unfolds the story by examining their social circumstances (2010: 37). A lot of experiences emerge through life stories techniques which are within "the context of the person's whole life" (2010: 35).

The advantages of the life story narratives are that it can be a very powerful approach, can bring in depth, meaning and insight in to the research, and produce a wealth of data. People tend not to hide the truth while telling their stories. The flip side of this method would be the fact that it tests the researcher's skills, disciplinary background, and the ability to interpret the story and present it in an authentic way. The process of analysis should be clear without harnessing the story (Bird 2011).

Widows belong to a specific location in the social structure and hence their perspective would contribute to a frame of knowledge based on their interpretations of their lives. From a feminist perspective, Sosulski shows how women are the real experts of their story, and how they "express authentic subjectivity and agency" (Roets and Goedgeluck as cited in Sosulski 2010: 36). Since my objective was to investigate the everyday experience of being a young widow, this approach was the best suited to allow my respondents to speak freely and in their own voice.

1.6.2 Data Collection and Sampling

The data collection was held in Trivandrum, Kerala, during July and August 2016. Interviews with a total of ten middle class and eight working class women who belonged in the Below Poverty Line group(BPL⁶), were held in urban Trivandrum. My sampling took the form of a snow ball effect. The age group I focused was from twenty-seven to forty-six years. I used purposive sampling to select the middle and working class women. I chose young widows with children, their ages ranging from four years to fifteen years.

The women selected belonged to both Hindu and Christian background. The Muslim community was not touched upon in the study. The personal laws applied to Muslim widows are entirely different and very much in favor of them. Due to a word limit, I knew I will not be able to cover it, as it probably might take up an entire new chapter.

The interviews were all unstructured and it was purely an experiential form of interview. They were held mostly in the home of the respondents except for one whom I interviewed in a café. The key informants were all interviewed at their work places. The duration of each interview with almost all respondents went beyond four hours, though initially I had asked for an hour.

I have transcribed all the interviews initially so that I don't miss out any of the nuances of the conversation. Though unstructured, it was classified under broad themes such as kinship relations, employment and sources of income, sexuality, freedom, mobility and societal views. Once the rapport was made, I allowed my respondents to speak the way they are comfortable with and only around the issues I felt needed more insight into, I probed a little more. Going through the recorded conversations, which was taken with their consent, allowed me to classify the way I had structured my design and processing the whole interview again gave me a far deeper insight into the issues.

I was partly based at Center for Development Studies in order to access the library and the resources available for my thesis. I had three categories in mind before I began my field work and wanted to stratify it as middle, working and upper middle class. I was clear that the working class segment belonged to the Below Poverty Line (BPL)section. Based on their economic and poverty threshold, they are provided with widow pension from the government. But to stratify middle and upper middle class segment was challenging for me. A professor from Center for Development Studies, Prof. Vijay Mohan Pillai,⁷ advised me that there are two ways by which I

⁶ To identify individuals living below the poverty, the Government of India has an economic benchmark so as to give aid to economically vulnerable groups.

⁷ Professor, Center for development Studies, Trivandrum. Profile added along with the key informants in the appendix.

could categorize middle and upper middle class. One way is based on their income, and in case they are reluctant to talk about it, he said the second option would be to go according to their consumption on a monthly basis. I took the second one as an option. But as I ventured into my field work, I realized I was able to do only two segments of the society - that is middle and working class.

1.6.3 Key informants

To better understand available opportunities and welfare, I selected five women activists from Trivandrum, Cochin and Kottayam as key informants;

1. Ms. SreeRenjini S, Programme Officer, Kerala Social Justice Department. She listed and explained various schemes and benefits the government avails the many working class widows.
2. Mrs. Mary Roy, an Indian educator and Social activist. She championed the cause of fighting for equal property rights for Syrian Christian women. I interviewed her in her school, Pallikoodam in Kottayam. As her health did not permit her to do an in depth interview, she compensated it with giving me adequate materials she documented and offered to answer me with any further questions I had through email.
3. Prof. Leela Gulati, Center for Development studies, Trivandrum. She gave me a better insight into how the many aspects of widows in Kerala should be looked at. Prof. Gulati played a key role in nurturing Center for Development studies as a key research center Trivandrum. 'A space of her own' that talks about the personal narratives of twelve women by various contributors' focuses on relationships between women of different generations in India.
4. Ms. Leela Menon, Kerala's first and senior most woman journalist and activist. She constantly brought out issues of abuses against women was my fourth key informant.
5. Ms. Beena Joseph, Activist and Counselor. She runs Judith Forum of widows' association in Kalady, Cochin.

1.6.4 Data Analysis

Analysis of the data was based on the technique of using Qualitative Data Analysis. Most importantly, using thematic analysis of concepts, techniques of coding and emerging patterns. The data has been used as themes and sub-themes and the relations between these. The written materials provided by key informants have also been used to analyze the thesis.

1.6.5 Limitations of the Thesis

I cannot claim that through this thesis I am going to bring out the exact situation that is happening in Trivandrum with young widows. The thesis is not a representative sample. As a result, I cannot speak in general on behalf of all widows. But the sample I took helped me to conduct in depth interviews and it opened up a window to their personal experiences. This project may certainly provide a new perspective and a dimension to the discourses around the social construct of widowhood.

1.6.6 Reflections and Ethical Considerations

My initial anxieties of how I could approach this sensitive topic vanished the moment I met the respondents. I wasn't sure initially how I would find my respondents. Being in Kerala most of my life, and fully aware of how women including me do not like to speak about their invisible pain to anyone outside of their family member was also worrying me. Before going for my field work, I prepared myself to approach few organizations like SEWA and SAKHI. I first approached SAKHI, an NGO in Trivandrum. From there I was advised as to how I could probably approach some of the women from their network. I later approached my friends and family members to help me identify and to make them consent for an hour's interview with me.

An instant rapport was built the moment I was with them. The initial fear that I might be using them for my research was removed once I knew how much they wanted to open up their pent up emotions that were bottled up inside their heart for years. The very fact that they wanted to share their stories was an emotional experience for me. Writing a thesis on young widows has been a challenge and an advantage in a certain way. I say challenging in terms of going through a lot of emotional and mental stress during the interviews. For each interview I had to share my personal experiences and the trauma attached with it. It wasn't easy opening up the Pandora's Box each time. With regards to the advantage, I did not enter the research as an outsider going vicariously looking at the experiences of widows. Being a young widow myself was a paramount factor in terms of building a trust. Upon building this bond, it enabled me to delve deeper into a lot of their experiences that were otherwise taken for granted.

I did not feel the necessity to take a written consent from them since all the eighteen respondents wanted to share their stories with me. I asked permission to record the interviews. The only concern couple of them had was whether any of what they speak will come out in the media. With regards to their anonymity, five of them gave me consent in providing their names, while others had concerns about their names coming out in my paper. I have personally opted to keep all the respondents' names anonymous. This will help to avoid any unwanted risks or fear of bringing out any names accidentally.

Chapter 2

Conceptual Framework

To investigate the lived experiences of young widows I will apply the broad framework of the capability approach. I further apply the concepts of gender, sexuality and agency that are useful in my analysis and provide an anchor to analyze specific incidences centered on widowhood.

2.1 Capability Approach Framework

In terms of conceptual framework, what seems more relevant for my study is Nussbaum's capability approach as a broad overarching framework. Capability approach is "a broad normative framework for the evaluation and assessment of individual well-being and social arrangements, the design of policies, and proposals about social change in the society" (Robeyn 2005: 93). It helps to conceptualize the deprivations of the marginalized individuals which accentuates "the social, economic and environmental barriers to equality" (Burchardt 2004: 735).

Women are not treated as ends in their own right, persons with a dignity that deserves respect from laws and institutions. Instead, they are treated as mere instruments of the ends of others – reproducers, caregivers, sexual outlets, agents of a family's general prosperity (Nussbaum 2001: 2).

Women across the globe lack a lot of support and many factors take a toll on their emotional well-being (Nussbaum 2000). Despite the constitutional tradition that promises equal rights for both men and women, there are inequalities among women throughout the country. They exercise less power in comparison to their male counterparts. This is an impediment in aspects like employment, mobility, property rights, sexuality, and many more in terms of their overall functioning and capabilities. In all these facets, "unequal social and political circumstances give women unequal human capabilities" (Nussbaum 2001: 1). The capability approach is more of a normative theory than an explanatory theory; a tool and a framework to "explain poverty, inequality or well-being" whereby to "conceptualize and evaluate" them (Robeyn 2005: 94). In terms of women and development, the framework evaluates policies and finds out if women are capable of exercising all their rights equally, fairly and with justice.

The concept of Capabilities Approach was pioneered by the economist and philosopher Amartya Sen in the 1980s. He was concerned more with a framework evaluating the quality of lives people can lead. He talks of a "perspective freedom as if freedom were a general, all-purpose social good of which the valued capabilities were simply instances" (Nussbaum 2011: 70). Nussbaum's version of this approach is that the list of ten capabilities is a "basis for the idea of fundamental political entitlements and constitutional law" (2011: 70). The entire concept of

capabilities approach stems from “a philosophical underpinning for an account of basic constitutional principles should be respected and implemented by the governments of all nations” (Nussbaum 2000: 222). She argues that choice and deprivation are two different. If by saying that one’s life is lacked by external deprivation or individual choice does not mean less a human life (Nussbaum 2000). In an era where profits and economic achievements are at the forefront, there is little being done on the human development aspect (Nussbaum 2011).

The purpose of the capabilities framework proposes to evaluate life of the problem faced by women. To unpack this, I need to introduce the central question used in the framework which is not “How satisfied is this woman?” or even “How much in the way of resources is she able to command?” It is, instead, “What is she actually able to do and to be?” (Nussbaum 2000: 300). In order for a woman to function to the best of her abilities what really are her opportunities and liberties. How much of freedom does she have in terms of her own life and the decisions and choices she is able to make freely without having to be stigmatized. Her approach is universal in the sense that she argues that the government should ratify these capabilities. Her work on capabilities aims to provide citizens the right for justification and argument for constitutional principles from their government (Nussbaum 2011). I found this useful in an overall perspective.

Women in developing countries face a lot of challenges in terms of rights, functionality and other aspects relating to their well-being. When she faces widowhood at a young age in a conservative, patriarchal society, her situation is heightened given the stigma attached to widowhood. “A tool whose purpose is gone: that is what a widow is, and rather like being dead” (Nussbaum 2001: 2).

The list of central capabilities does not necessarily mean that it covers the whole theory of justice, but rather it gives “a basis for determining a decent social minimum in a variety of areas” (Nussbaum 2001: 75). The crux of the theory is that it is a set of fundamental human capabilities which are important to lead a good life. The capabilities required to live a life of dignity and respect may be listed and justified and should serve as a standard for development policy.

To see a young widow living a life of dignity, to be treated with regard and respect and where she has been put in a position to live life humanly, is what through this capability approach I would like to bring forward. She talks about the “combined capabilities which may be defined as internal capabilities combined with suitable external conditions for the exercise of the function” (Nussbaum 2001: 84-85). Nussbaum focuses on the understanding of the goal where each nation is concerned and her claim to bring out this capabilities approach as a guide and critical standard for development policy (2001). She argues that to live a life of full human flourishing, everyone should be able to exercise the following list of ten capabilities (Nussbaum 2001: 78-80).

- Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length.
- Being able to have good health, adequate nutrition, adequate shelter, opportunities for sexual satisfaction and choice in reproduction, and mobility.
- Being able to avoid unnecessary and non-beneficial pain and to have pleasurable experiences.
- Being able to use the senses, imagine, think, and reason; and to have the educational opportunities necessary to realize these capacities.
- Being able to have attachments to things and persons outside ourselves.
- Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's own life.
- Being able to live for and to others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings.
- Being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals and the world of nature.
- Being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities.
- Being able to live one's own life and no one else's; enjoying freedom of association and freedom from unwarranted search and seizure.

The “capabilities approach”, Nussbaum claims, that absence of one can affect a person to live a good life (2001: 81). I will use this approach as an overarching framework and relate my findings to the capabilities mentioned here. This will help understand the difficulties encountered by the widows in order to lead a quality life.

2.2 Gender and Sexuality

A key concept in this study is gender. Scott is influenced by post structuralist school of thought and based on this approach, it is stated how “gender history” is not synonymous with “women’s history” (1986: 1056). Gender, she says, is a creation by the society and that is a way of referring to the “exclusively social origins of the subjective identities of men and women” (1986: 1056). Feminists have talked about how gender works in “human social relationships” and “how it gives meanings and perceptions of historical knowledge” (Scott 1986: 1055). The theorists of patriarchy have looked at how women have been seen as a subordination to men. Some feminists debate on how the process of reproduction and the hard process which a woman undergoes through labor and the “social reality” of their work in childbirth (Scott 1986: 1058). While for some others, “sexuality” was the answer to the whole process of “production and reproduction of subject’s gendered identity” (Scott 1986: 1058).

Power is centered to Scott’s analysis. The reason being her interest lies in looking at the in equal relationships and through the study of gender relations one can fathom the inequalities in general (1986). Her approach is based on the need to look at gender concretely and contextually. Gender is a social construct culturally produced and historically variable which has a material structure and is reproduced through symbols/ideologies, signifying power relations. It

operates within four fields: Institutional, Ideological, Symbolic and Subjective identity (Scott 1986). I will look at all four levels to explore the lives of young widows. These levels relate also to Nussbaum's 10 capabilities and the dimensions identified in M Chen's research on widows, namely right to remarriage, property, kinship relations and living arrangements, access to income/employment, the symbolism of the widow as inauspicious, upholding the honor of the family etc.

Linked with gender is the concept of Sexuality. It is clear that the links between gender, sexuality and inequality are far-fetched, complex and very context specific. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize its multidimensional role in affecting someone's marginalization. There is a significant silence around the issue of widows and sexuality in India. Especially young widow's lives are girdled through cultural controls over sexuality. The condition of young widows become quite complex, controlled and with little space to move due to the stigmatization they face once they experience widowhood.

The system of legislation and modernization have brought about some level of improvement in terms of widows' pension plan but their lives are still dominated and controlled through a "construction and reconstruction of a hegemonic masculinity" (Ahmed 2009: 27). Marriage in Indian society shapes her sexual identity and as a daughter in law she is very often seen as a threat to her household and it becomes her duty to protect her dignity and "therefore strictures on her sexuality become tighter" (Ahmed 2009: 34). Even the very few reformers who fought fearlessly for the rights of widows, could not do anything about the fabrication of the "discourse of the widows' sexuality in view" (Ahmed 2009: 39).

When a woman is widowed it is important to see how power relations get exacerbated. It is important to note how a woman's social life is constrained once she becomes a widow. The basis of her identity depends mainly on the conjugal relationship through marriage (Ahmed 2009). Sexuality in the academic discourse has gained a lot of importance as a lot of feminists have started looking deeper into the lives and deprivations faced by women. It is mainly the middle and upper class women who face the stigma far more and are often seen as the "ground on which question of modernity and tradition are framed" (John and Nair 1998: 8). Seeing through the lens of 'sexuality' it may be noted how it has remained invisible in the development discourse. Sexuality is not to be seen as something hidden but it is of central importance. The "control exercised by persons on their sexuality and the bodily integrity" they enjoy significantly has not been recognized yet in "mainstream development discourse" (Devika 2009: 24).

The reformists and social movements in the 20th century tried to revamp the traditional system of marriage and conjugalit. Following the old traditional system of marriage, women did not have to assert their sexual freedom; rather it was a part of the autonomy they exercised. With the modernization, what they aimed to do was create a more disciplined, and a "patrilineal

monogamous nuclear family” (Devika 2009: 25). The missionaries and the reformists were trying to bring about a very disciplined family approach which is all about “production and wealth creation” (Devika 2009: 25-26). The education level for the modern women is still being given prominence, and many of them being qualified with a professional background. But the ‘ideal woman’ was expected to remain domesticated and use her education in order to fulfill the needs and maintain the welfare of the family. This “modern imagining of ideal femininity in Kerala” expected women to be “the provider of pleasure, in order to cement conjugalit through ensuring pleasure” (Devika 2009: 26). Such pleasure, says Devika, was seen as keeping a marriage stable (2009).

That a woman will have only one man in her life time has to a large extent come about by the conditioning of these ‘monogamous ideal’ set forth by the early reformists (Devika 2009). This discourse has helped me in my analysis of understanding why despite remarriage not being a taboo was not thought about among many of the respondents. Among the working class, sexuality is not seen as condemned as much as is visible among the middle and upper class women. The working class are more concerned with health, finance and maintenance of their children as a barrier for “upward mobility”; whereas for the class above, it has got to do with more societal pressure where sexuality is seen as an abjection (Devika 2009: 31).

2.3 Agency

Though this concept, I would like to explore the view questioning the normative way in which women’s agency have been approached. The whole focus on agency in gender studies has altered our portrayal of people as docile victims of historical and institutional framework. Saba Mahmood provides theoretical contribution and questions conventional discourses implicitly, including development. She questions the overwhelming tendency within post structuralist feminist scholarship to conceptualize agency in terms of subversion of social norms, to locate agency within those operations that resist the dominating modes of power (2005: 14).

By looking at the experience of 3rd world Arab and Muslim women in Egypt, who are portrayed as passive, submissive, dominated and lacking agency etc. she tries to challenge this portrayal by careful and powerful theoretical reflection. It is further seen how Mahmood (2001) rethinks the concept of agency as one that needs to be ‘kept open’ and freed from the deterministic binaries of resistance or subordination. Says Mahmood, “We think of agency not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create” (2001: 203). When one’s own interests are realized against all the obstacles and when one is able to awaken the desire and autonomy in the form of resistance is when an agency can be envisioned (Mahmood 2001: 206). Mahmood adds further by stating how a society is structured to cater to patriarchal model and the result being a “direct suppression of women’s concerns” (2001: 206).

A different perspective while exploring young widow's empowerment can be seen in Naila Kabeer's article where she conceptualizes empowerment and says how empowerment is the ability to make critical life choices. It means providing people with the means to make choices. It implies a process of change. The two kind of choices she mentions is one where strategic life choice such a choice of livelihood, where to live, whether to marry, whom to marry to have children etc. and this frames the second order choices which focuses on the quality of life. Unless one is able to make such strategic choice the question of quality becomes less consequential (Kabeer 1999: 437).

One of the dimensions of power according to her, relates to agency; which is "the ability to define one's goals and acts upon them" (Kabeer 1999: 438). When women (including men) can make their own choice without fearing an opposition from others and are able to pursue their own goals in when agency is seen as positive; whereas when one uses threat or violence to exercise power then it is seen as negative (Kabeer 1999).

The symbolic meaning of culture and the values attached incarcerates women's ability to make critical life choices. If they do, they end up paying a penalty for their autonomy (Kabeer 1999). Besides constraints it is interesting to scout how silence and secrecy have been used as strategies for negotiations in a society characterized by patriarchal practices. Under marginalized positions, both silence and secrecy are believed to have a "long history as survival for women (and men)" and "sexuality has been a key point" (Parpart 2010: 5). Both these reflect gender inequalities in a society and in order to renegotiate the gender hierarchies and practices such techniques are employed as strategic tools (Parpart 2010: 8).

A well-known scholar from Kerala, Devika, argues how the notion of "swatantryam" did not furnish the same meaning as the English word "freedom" (2009: 46). With modernity and patriarchal practices in Kerala, the ideology of modern gender became more concrete. By "swatantryam" it only meant that a woman's external constraints were not removed. But her space has been clearly demarcated and a specific domain for 'man' and 'woman' was made specific. Any sort of resistance would only go against this notion of "swatantryam" and that would mean a "tantonnni" (one who does as one pleases (Devika 2009: 46).

How young widows exercise their agency and negotiate power relations in the family and community and in what ways they express and develop their own sense of personhood and well-being comes out clearly from my analysis.

Chapter 3

Challenges and Coping Mechanisms: Family, Community and Society

This chapter focuses on the everyday lives and coping mechanisms of young widows with children. The first section deals with Kinship relations and living arrangements, followed by economic resources of income, right to property, freedom, mobility and society's views and finally gender and sexuality. It sheds light on how these economic, social and cultural factors affect the lives of these young women.

3.1 Kinship Relations and Living Arrangements

3.1.1 Eviction from Marital Home

As per the cultural norms of the present day, a married woman is expected to leave her home and stay with her husband's family. The sons in most households of the respondents were the main bread winners and his parents depend on him to a large extent. In the initial period of widowhood, many women faced a lot of verbal abuse and neglect from their in-laws in the marital home.

My husband was the main bread winner for his family. My in-laws were very loving while my husband was alive. After he died, the way they behaved with me and my family was so bad that I could not believe that the same people who were so nice, could be so nasty with me. After Wilson (her husband) died, they came to my natal home, and said in front of my mother and brother that "we thought seeing your love for our son that you will also kill yourself, and why are you not even thinking of it". My parents and brother were shocked hearing this and they told me never to go back again. (*Rema, 27 years, middle class*)

As told by another respondent:

My parents saw how badly my in-laws started treating me after my husband died. My son was just nine months old. They started harassing me during the first seven days itself. My parents decided to take me back to their home. Once I was back, they kept coming to see their grandson often. One day, they took my son to their place and did not bring him back. I went hysterical and went there and brought him back. After that incident I told them they could come and see him at my place if they wanted to. (*Sunitha, 36 years, Working class*)

The eviction or indifference from their marital home seemed to be an issue among many women who were interviewed. With an exception of one or two, the remaining had an estranged relationship with their in-laws. For Rema, it was mainly a state of shock she went through. She cannot get over the thought of how their behavior changed quickly. She figured the love they

showed while her husband was there “was all a drama”. In most cases, it is only because of their strong parental support they were able to return. They both fear that they were mainly evicted due to fear of them claiming the property.

3.1.2 Social Ostracism

A second key challenge was related to some of them being socially ostracized. This included attending social events.

“I am never called for any auspicious events because they feel I am someone inauspicious. All these are being done by own people.” (*Vasantha, 43 years, middle class*)

“For one of my aunt’s daughter’s marriage engagement, I was asked not to be near the function. I was very upset and since then I have not stepped into her house.” (*Sunitha, 36 years, working class widow*)

Vasantha was twenty-seven years while widowed and has a hearing disability. Her kids and mother also suffer the same disabilities. Together they face a far higher marginalization due to widowhood, disability and lack of a strong male presence in the family. Preetha, another respondent mentioned how she was invited to be a godmother for one of her nephew’s baptism and later was shocked to hear from the grandaunt of the baby that since she is a widow its best that she does not become the godmother of a new born. She says, “even if most Christians claim they don’t have such superstitious beliefs, they still act this way when it comes to their own family member.” (*Preetha, 45 years, middle class*)

“The stigma of being a widow”, says Sreelakshmi, widowed at thirty-eight years, “may not be as bad as to what one hears in the north but people here still talk and it can be sensed from the way they behave”. Though these issues are all quiet subtle and not openly seen or heard, they were saying how they are expected to knowingly keep away from such occasions. These ‘symbolic’ ideas of cultural representation are seen in certain aspects of their lives.

3.1.3 Feeling of Insecurity and Isolation

Once widowed, I have become very isolated. Where there is a gathering, and if I am part of it, I hear people saying ‘oh poor her she is a widow’. The fact that my kids can’t hear, also becomes a talking point among relatives. All five of us are deaf and because of all this they avoid us for my own aunts and brother’s kids’ wedding. (*Vasantha, 43 years, middle class*)

In Vasantha’s case it was not just an isolation factor but also being discriminated because of their hearing impairment. The feeling of isolation was talked about by almost all women. “The moment husband dies situations changes. If a man is in our life, then people think twice before they even talk anything.” (*Ajitha, 33 years, working class*)

From their narration, it was reflected how having a man is what brings a security in their lives and a sudden loss of their partner leads to social and family isolation. Ajitha's insecurity gets even stronger when she hears people talking about her "If I talk to any man, they say unwanted things about me. They even went to the extent of saying that I even killed my husband." (*Ajitha, 33 years, working class*)

For Anju, despite moving to her natal home, her insecurity and fear mounted mainly because of her incapability to decide about her own career and life. It was made very clear by her mother that she should live by her parents' terms and not her own way.

When I wanted to start a stitching unit, my mother clearly told me that I could do whatever I want but everything inside the house. I want some freedom, but I know I cannot for fear of what society may think. (*Anju, 45 years, middle class*)

The insecurity seen in her came mainly out of her being economically and emotionally dependent on her parents. When we were talking, her mother suddenly walked in. She asked her why I was there and what the interview was regarding. After a few minutes of conversation inside a room, Anju came out and told me that we could go up to the terrace for the remaining interview. When I asked her if I should come another day, she held my hand saying not to leave and that she just wanted to speak. While in the terrace, she was again all smiles. She told me her mother is a very tough lady and "I have to abide by her rules and if not, then I will not be able to stay peacefully at home with my daughter" (*Anju, middle class*). I realized how all these restrictions and challenges have forced Anju to become stronger to handle these realities and to take control of her situations.

I work so hard and I also do a part time teaching job in women's college. And then I am back to my stitching work. I get a lot of orders for stitching saree blouses and salwars. I work till twelve in the night and by the time I am in bed, I am fast asleep. My parents take care of my daughter so I don't worry much. (*Anju, 45 years, middle class*)

The marriage system in Kerala now is based on patrilocal residence. As far as both living arrangements and kinship relations are concerned, one of the most crucial findings from both middle and working class women are the overarching dependence for economic and moral support from the natal family. It almost looked like the 'fate' of these young widows was decided either by their in-laws, their parents or for some by their extended relatives. This brings about an effect of isolation and leads to a deprivation among widows. Sometimes, I wondered whether it is the strength within them, or it is just the helplessness or vulnerability that makes them move on the way they are currently doing. The social complications that they encounter make the experiences of widowhood more heart-wrenching for these young women.

More than half the respondents told me how they have at least once tried to commit suicide or had wished the practice of *sati*⁸ existed in Kerala. In the present day and age, it was hard for me to assimilate these thoughts that were pouring out through them. These narratives showed how they often comply with their challenging situations more passively in order to maintain the need to honor the family. All of them are well aware that unless they have support from their parents or close relatives, they will be subject to various types of mistreatment.

3.2 Economic Resources: Employment/ Income

Most of them spoke about their struggles to cope with their financial and employment resources.

I was never exposed to the outside world before my marriage. My husband had a steady govt. job. We get his pension now but that alone is not enough to support my mother, two girls and to pay the rent. I never wanted to work, but I am forced to take up a job now or else it will be difficult to run the house. (*Sreelakshmi, 44 years, middle class*)

Sreelakshmi's 'not wanting to work' confirms Chen's argument as to how in an ideal world women are brought up to be dependent on men. She is first dependent on her father, then her husband and later her children (2000: 312). She was brought up in a way that she would study, and when she is of marriageable age, she would just marry the man of her parents' choice and take care of her husband's needs thereafter. Very often they are "perceived" and conditioned to be dependent on men" (Chen 2000: 316).

I live in a rented house, and have three kids. I have only studied till my 5th grade and widow pension alone is not enough for me. Very recently I found a job in a fish market and now I get a regular income along with a widow pension. (*Susan, 37 years, working class*)

The restraint in resources and not getting an opportunity in terms of a job adds to their vulnerability. When they start looking for a job outside, they run the risks related to sexuality. When I spoke with Ajitha, (*33 years from working class*) she was saying how hard it is to find a job. Now I am trying to apply for a job through some politicians and they tell me only if I yield to them they will help me. I plainly told them, I don't need that kind of job". When I met her, she was still on the lookout for a job. With two kids to take care of, her economic situation being so difficult, she is forced to ask her relatives for money as her parents are unable to support monetarily. She has applied for her widow's pension and hopes to get it soon which may give some respite to the present situation she is in now.

Similar sentiments of the above two women were echoed by Vasantha where she was married off at seventeen and widowed at twenty-seven. In Vasantha's case, her physical

⁸ Among some Hindu communities in India, a widowed woman used to jump to the funeral pyre of her husband. This practice was abolished in 1829 under East India Company Rule.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bengal_Sati_Regulation,_1829

disability barred her from getting an employment immediately. She was forced to take up door to door selling of insurance policies. She spoke further about the difficulties she encountered taking up a similar job. This disability hampered her “capabilities” and made her in a position of being doubly disadvantaged.

Aadra, a 43-year-old middle class widow, runs pillar to post trying to work hard and to keep her family running. She was looking so exhausted and tired when I met her. With so much of hard work, her income is just minimum. If it's not for the support of her mother who gets a monthly pension, she says she and her daughter will not be able to survive.

With regards to the economic resources, there was more struggle for the working class widows. The pension of a maximum of INR 1000 (13 euros approximate) hardly suffices the maintenance cost for a proper living. The struggle to find gainful employment is much higher. For the middle class the need to be employed is certainly a prerogative, but the support from their parents or brothers are way too high in comparison. And some of them were already employed before they were widowed and that was a respite for most. As has been pointed out, “widowhood and economic vulnerabilities” have an impact on the well-being of their children (Chen 2000: 339). The children of working class women suffered greater economic deprivation than the middle class widows’ children.

3.3. The Right to Property

“A widow has rights, but generally she has to fight for them”, (Kshatriya woman, in Andhra Pradesh as cited in Chen 2000: 261). To understand the analysis a little deeper, the right of inheritance to property across religions needs to be looked into.

India being a secular country, due to its diversity, has different laws. Each religion has different customs and traditions so it was not seen practical to have one law. In matters of personal law, concerning marriage and inheritance, each religious group has its own law (Chacko 2003). In Kerala, Hindus mainly Nairs and Ezhavas customarily practiced matrilineal inheritance (Agarwal 1994). Which meant women enjoyed property rights far more than men and a girl child was considered a precious possession. This system was fragmented with the Travancore Nair regulation Act of 1925 whereby the separate laws were made to one Hindu code (Chhachhi 1991: 158). Codification brought about changes in the matrilineal, patrilineal and bilineal communities of the Travancore and Cochin (Chhachhi 1991).

As with Christian Laws of the early 20th Century, it was completely biased against women. The father had the complete right to possess the property. The laws were later challenged by Mrs. Roy in 1984, which is elaborated in Chapter 4. The codification of personal laws and its institutionalization brought about a particular family structure whereby patriarchal dominance of men and unequal treatment of women became more widespread (Chhachhi 1991).

Although Hindu and Christian law do give some rights of inheritance to women but in practice this right is not fully recognized. For young widows the issue of property due to their husbands created tensions.

My husband is the youngest of the three brothers. An estate and few other properties which is in his name is also attached to his mother's name. My husband used to always tell me how he wanted to build a farm house there and retire when he is old. But now mother in law does not even mention anything about it. I cannot claim for it unless she is willing to give me or my kids the share. I am currently being supported by my mother and my brother. I have three kids and my eldest is also working now. So that's an additional income. I fear that the indifference now my mother in law showing towards us is because she fears that we will claim for our rights. (*Preetha, 45 years, middle class*)

Another respondent pointed;

I tried asking for 1.5 cents of land that belonged to my husband. But it's been more than a year since he died and they haven't said anything about it. My parents brought me home and I am now dependent on them. (*Sunitha, 36 years, working class*)

What is seen from the above statements is that a widow's right to property is often disregarded. In Preetha's case, the property was already allotted in her husband's name prior to his death but the nominee added was his mother. Here Preetha is not able to claim for that since she does not want to get into confrontation with her in-laws. Widows were seen rarely exercising their rights for fear of what people may talk. Like Rema mentioned earlier, the indifference and sudden distance they keep from them could be because of their fear that their widowed daughter in law may assert her rights. Most of them when asked are aware of their property rights of widows. It was just that they did not want to get into a fight. With regards to issues of property, a woman's response, according to Scott, includes bargaining with kin, negotiating and resisting occasionally, accepting and also compromising (as cited in Philip A 2003: 247).

3.4 Freedom, Mobility: Societal Surveillance

One of the key challenges most of the respondents faced was the freedom and mobility and the fear of how society monitors them constantly, irrespective of whether they were still in the marital home, natal home or living on their own.

When it is only around 8.00pm and I want to pick my kids either from their tuitions or other classes, they make a comment saying "God alone know where she is going out at this time of the night." The same people would not even say a word when my husband was alive. My husband while alive was at sea most of the time since he was a mariner, yet people didn't dare to speak. The moment one knows you have no man in the family, then they try all that they can to make one feel insecure and isolated from the rest. It's almost as if I have no identity anymore. (*Preetha, 45 years, middle class*)

Most of them found it real hard to accept the new challenges, as they were now placed under surveillance by society. This meant going out for a movie late in the evening or having to come back before sunset. “When I go out, people make crude remarks. If I talk to a man outside of my home, they say unwanted things about me” (*Ajitha, 33 years, working class*). She is haunted by these remarks and feels helpless. A transformation from wifehood to widowhood affected them in terms of their social skills. It’s not that most of them really miss a “man” in their life but it’s the restrictions that society places on them which becomes unbearable. Tara says “I don’t need another man in my life, but what I miss is going out freely to watch a movie or a dinner late in the evenings which I did so often with my husband” (*Tara, 44 years, working class*). And her freedom to even go out with her colleagues for an office gathering that involves an overnight stay is also completely ruled out by her mother. “I too am scared now and don’t want to give a chance for people to talk” says Tara.

A widow’s movements are always being watched. Being independent and working also meant staying within “the societal limits”. What that implies is how society has imposed certain restrictions on these single women with regards to certain dress and behavior codes. “In this society I do have issues when it comes to dressing the way I want. If I feel like wearing a dress, I cannot do so” (*Laila, 45 years, middle class*).

Similar emotionalism was echoed by both Anju and Nilima.

One day, I wore a bright colored salwar and because I love wearing flowers, I wore some and went to my daughter’s school. One lady who is known to me asked me how I could look so bright and cheerful in spite of what I have undergone. For a moment I did not know how to respond. (*Anju, 45 years, working class*)

As pointed by Nilima;

My people told me that I should remove my mangalsutra⁹. People talked a lot about me. They say she is still wearing her mangalsutra. But let me ask you what is the people’s problem? They are always watching me. They ask why I am wearing bright colored sarees and so on. And because I have a slightly fair skin, they say all sort of bad things. They say look at her walking around. (*Nilima, 43 years, working class*)

To bypass the traditional circuits of what to do and what not to do and to seek out on their own has been difficult. A personal instance that comes to my mind while analyzing their situation is when I was wearing my wedding ring for a year or more after my husband died. I wore it partly because I did not want potential suitors approaching and did not want to hamper my freedom to move around without having to fear, and also because I did not want them to think I was back in the ‘market’.

⁹ A symbolic representation of marriage among many religions in India

Aadra a middle class respondent was of the strong opinion that it is definitely unsafe for a woman to walk around at night alone. She even refuses to go for any functions which is beyond Kerala and says, if her husband was there that would definitely not have been an issue. She has recently started to neglect her own health and has high level of diabetes. Aadra does not dream or want anything for herself apart from doing her current work and to see her daughter well settled.

There may be subtle differences among the two classes of women with regards to freedom, mobility and societal views. One such difference I noticed is the fear a middle class woman has is much more as she feels the reputation of the family and her in-laws' family may be at stake if she chooses to move around the way she wishes. But for working class women, they are not as worried about the reputation factors rather the fear is more regarding their own safety reasons.

In the absence of a male member, they are now asked to live for their children and to socialize only with their children to avoid any callous remarks. The work place, I was told, was also selected carefully by few. Some of them even refuse to tell their colleagues that they are widows. She becomes careful the way she dresses up for fear of attracting other men 'unnecessarily'.

3.5 Widows as 'Anomalies' in Society: Fear and Constraints on Remarriage

It was surprising to see how, many of these young women opted not to remarry given the challenges they are undergoing. Many who wanted to remarry saw the obstacles that were coming up and later decided it was best not to think about it. In Laila's case her in-laws did not want her to think of remarriage even though she was only twenty-seven years at the time of widowhood. At the same time, she wanted to consider remarriage upon insistence from her parents. But after a terrifying experience she decided against it.

My daughter was only four years and a man in the lift tried to molest her. She came home crying and when I heard what happened to her, I decided never to get married. I cannot trust another man with my daughter. For another man, my daughter is just an object and will never be a daughter. (*Laila 45 years, middle class*)

Though remarriage is not a taboo in Kerala, the widows I spoke to expressed very little desire in remarrying. And also there was not much desire from their natal family as well since most of them feared about the treatment that will be meted to their grandchildren. The social conditioning of the "monogamous ideal of having only one partner in a life time" (Devika 2009: 27) also makes them feel guilty of even thinking of another man in their life time. Additionally, they feared the chance of 'conjugal happiness' in a remarriage. This was the situation I came across when a friend of mine felt very insecure and ended up getting married, only to find out tensions arising between her new husband and her son. She had to send her son back to her parent's home. She told me later that she regretted having to make this decision. Her intention of remarriage was for financial security and male protection, but the result was the opposite.

Vasantha reported how this young man whom she saw as her little brother took her to a place in the pretext of helping her find a job. When she knew that his intention was to sexually molest her, she managed to escape and warned him not to come anywhere near her. She was only twenty-seven when she became a widow with three children who were born deaf. Her immediate reaction was to lodge a complaint against this guy who tried to molest her. “I could have complained but wasn’t sure how people would take it. I have small kids and I am a widow, they might twist the story in some other way” (*Vasantha, 43 years, middle class*).

The ‘fear of meeting someone’ and ‘falling in love’ was seen when Anju shared her experience. She has never had a chance to meet anyone and is scared to even be out in places where her chances of meeting someone may be higher;

If someone approaches me and shows me love, I am scared I will fall for it, but I know I cannot because I will not get any support from home. I lead a very mechanical life. I ask myself sometimes how I am living like this. But then very painfully I suppress all my desires. Because I keep thinking if I do go forward with my wishes then how will my family react, how will society see me, will they see me from a different angle, what will happen to me then. (*Anju, 45 years, middle class*)

Anju’s desire to be in a relationship got suppressed when she thought of how society may perceive her. Her fear forced her for self-control and discipline about her own innate desires. For working class women there was a slight difference though the fear of how a new marriage would affect their children was the same. For instance, Susan, who works in a fish mart after her husband’s death, says she really misses having a partner to talk to and to be with. She found her boyfriend through a phone call. Since then they have been texting and calling each other. But she does not want to live with him because she has a teenage daughter and two sons who are in the high school as well. She says he is willing to marry her but she wants to wait till her daughter moves out.

He is few years younger than me but I don’t care about the age. For me I only need a man with whom I can talk to, share my feelings. I did meet him couple of times outside. I am hoping one day we can spend time together once my children have moved out. I haven’t been able to tell this to anyone except my daughter who understands me. (*Susan, 37 years, working class*).

The choices of remarrying or even entering into a relationship comes with a lot of obstacles for the widows in general. As per the cultural norms, finding/meeting a partner was seen to be more difficult for both working and middle class women. Most widows were of the opinion that this would not have been the case if it was the man who was widowed. Society would be more open to seeing him marry soon. The children of all the widows are very young and the fear of them being abandoned or molested was one of the biggest fears that came across sections.

Given the tradition of a matrilineal system, a Kerala woman should have higher scope of remarriage. Especially when remarriage is not looked down upon (*Gulati, as told in her personal interview*).

3.6 Concluding Remarks

This chapter clearly brings out the gendered discrimination against widows at all social fields of institutional, symbolic, normative and subjective identity (Scott 1986).

From the above narratives of these women, it shows how they are being discriminated at an ‘institutional level’ by their family, society and state. The eviction from their marital home, isolation, the constant surveillance by both family and society and the inadequacy of the state to monitor and support them with the transfer of property has also come about. Most women have internalized the notion and believe it is more of a man’s right when in reality it is not true. At the ‘normative’ and ‘symbolic’ level it was seen how they felt ostracized, being considered inauspicious and lacked freedom of mobility as it was considered not the ‘right thing’ for a woman in many ways. These practices come out more as a “social consensus rather than of conflict” (Scott 1986: 1068).

These narratives also establish the dominant gender ideology in Kerala which defines that man is the main breadwinner whereby women, however educated or not, withdraws from the work force. A transition through widowhood poses a major challenge for these young women who need much more help in terms of moving forward. Most of these young women have accepted their ‘identity and role in the society’. There are many ‘ideal constructs and representations’ about a widowed woman. These constructs, it is seen, are pertinent to the lives of many widows. The “significant silence” (Ahmed 2009) around the issues of sexuality and their lives being still dominated and controlled through “a construction and reconstruction of hegemonic masculinity” (Ahmed 2009: 27) is also brought forth from these narratives.

Leela Menon, who has documented women from different parts of society in Kerala over many years, points out how Kerala still needs to progress a lot in terms of gender equality and justice. She tells me how once widowed, they are not accepted easily and their movements are always being watched (*Interview*).

However, these women are not just victims. In the next chapter I explore the ways in which they express their agency.

Chapter 4

Negotiating Personhood: Forms of Agency

This chapter explores and analyses how young widows give expression and meaning to their own personhood. I delve deeper into exploring their subjectivities/desires/hopes despite the restrictions and control over them elaborated in the previous chapter. I have categorized this chapter based on the different modalities of agency under three sections: Constrained agency, Covert agency, Overt agency and Challenging the patriarchal system.

4.1 Constrained Agency

Constrained agency is the internalization of gender ideology which means a person's acceptance of a set of values and norms are often established by others. Most of the widows were often seen to be accepting the situation the way it is, without complaining or being assertive of their rights.

I do feel the need to make my own decisions most of the times, but I cannot go against my parents and lead an independent life even if I feel like it inside of me, because I am still dependent on them financially. (*Anju, 45 years, middle class*)

She is secure as she has a job but is under the control of her parents. She is a part time teacher of fashion designing school, and also runs a tailoring unit in one of her mother's property. Her failure to follow her heart will mean she will have to pay a huge price. This is similar to Maya from a working class background, who was taken back from her in-laws' place as she was being treated badly. Her parents now support her. These are young women who would like to lead an independent and capable life without having to feel the pressure of doing so. But reality is the opposite of what they want to be.

My role now is to work, and bring up my daughter. I should not be selfish thinking about remarriage. My life is over and now it is my daughter's life that is more important. (*Aadra, 43 years, middle class*)

Aadra's 'self-guided choice and action' was imposed by herself to avoid any 'external obstacles' that come with it. She also says "I don't have any problems because I chose to live a very sedate life and never give a chance for others to talk anything bad about me". By saying it is better not to allow others to talk bad was an outcome of a cultural coercion among most widows. Most of them adhered to the construct of 'gender ideology' where its best if they remain passive, be more willing to accept their current situations and safeguard their children. "I feel it's not my needs anymore that matters, but it is my children's needs that are most important" (*Nirmala, 38 years, working class*). These young widows ended up negotiating their survival mainly by acceptance of the situation and blaming it on their fate and destiny. They felt its best to remain 'docile'. They were aware of the disadvantages of being a widow in a patriarchal dominated society.

The inability to make ‘strategic life choices’ also came about due to the financial burden that has fallen on them. “It’s not that I don’t want to be happy and think of settling down again, but the financial burden that has fallen on me is so high that I cannot think of a personal life and happiness”. (*Sindhu, 39 years, working class*)

I do make day to day decisions with regards to my children, but any major decisions like if there is a school change, or if I have to plan a travel with them, I have to ask my mother and brother since I am still economically dependent on them. (*Preetha, 45 years, middle class widow*)

Preetha’s experience gets grounded further from what Chen argues saying how “in negotiating their individual lives, most women do so from a subordinate position”, could be due to the traditional or conservative upbringing and “conditioned by the ideology surrounding them” (2000: 10).

To be able to live life with “self-interest” and to be “unencumbered by the weight of custom and tradition” has been a far-fetched dream for most widows (Mahmood 2001: 207). For these young women to be free, it was important that they are able to do things without any ‘direct coercion’. What was seen among the middle class was a tighter constraint than the working class in terms of having to voice their opinions. They felt they had to constantly worry not just about the family but the society at large and preferred to be silent and less assertive. Silence was certainly an option for fear of being termed as a bad woman, or entirely ostracized from the society for simply having the courage to open the mouth and doing as one pleases (Win Everjoice as cited in Parpart 2010: 2).

4.2 Covert Agency

In spite of the internalization of gender ideology, women were not just passive victims. Under the cover of ‘silence’ of sexuality, they often had hidden desires within which they were so often not able to express openly. “If I open up about my sexual desires I will be termed as a bad woman” (*Neena, 45 years, middle class*). A few women who really desired deep down to be in a relationship could not say this openly. However, they did try to develop relationships covertly and discreetly.

Since I knew marrying was not an option anymore, I decided to talk to people and date online. I have been dating a guy since the last eight years, I have not seen this person till now. I just talk to him. He is working abroad, and is very busy. Somehow, I have never been able to meet him nor cook up any excuses to meet him. May be once my kids settle down, we may be able to think of it. I do have a lot of sexual desires. In a society like Trivandrum, I do not have the guts or the courage to meet him outside. I was very doubtful how I would ever satisfy my desires. He comes to India once or twice a month but somehow we cannot meet. He is now more of a companion whom I can talk and share

my feelings. I do not know anything more about him other than what I talk to him over the phone. (*Laila, 45 years, middle class*)

Some of them chose spirituality once they knew remarriage or having a relationship or dressing the way they desire was not an option for reasons stated before. Being spiritual meant more of an “expression of a performed self instead of contributing to the making of that self” (Mahmood 2001: 215).

I do feel a need for a companion and miss a partner in my life, but I know remarriage cannot happen with my kids still going to school, and now I fully surrendered myself to god and want to lead a spiritual life. God knows my needs and I know he will take care of me. (*Preetha, 45 years, middle class*)

As per the societal norm, the middle class widows felt there was far more acceptance if they were seen pious. Even if they were not so pious to begin with, their actions or conduct lead them to becoming spiritual from within by constantly being a part of the prayer meetings or other forms of religious associations. As Mahmood states, “instead of innate human desires eliciting outward forms of conduct, it is the sequence of practices and actions one is engaged in that determines their desires and emotions” (2001: 211).

The narratives show how “women’s choices are deeply affected by socio- cultural constraints” (Devika 2009) and how sexuality is not just a minor issue but a crucial factor for their livelihood and well- being.

Evidence of secrecy was seen in many situations among these women. The key to survival practice is to maintain a certain amount of secrecy. This is seen when Laila talks about her having to lie to her in-laws if she has to leave home after six in the evening. “I do feel like going out for a movie late night, but if I do people may talk something bad about me” (*Tara, 44 years, middle class*). Going out late in the evening, wearing bright colored clothes, flowers in their head or watching a movie alone in a theater is still unacceptable in this male dominated society. They are not accepting the “ideological justifications” that they are being passive victims, but rather they are seen to be resisting their needs in a much subtler and covert ways (Agarwal 1994: 423).

4.3 Overt Agency: Exercising Choice

Among the respondents, few widows were able to make choices and were willing to challenge the patriarchal norms.

As one young widow put it:

I lost my husband when I was only 26. My kids were really small. After few years, I met a man and he moved in with me and my kids. He was with me for eight years and later we separated. I was able to do this because I was living independently with my kids and no in-laws to worry me. (*Tripti 41 years, working class*)

She did not fear being ostracized from the society. When she was convinced she needed a man and that he was worth trusting with her kids, she made the decision to move in with him. Later she also made the decision to tell him that the relationship will not work for obvious reasons. She could ask him to leave her home again not having to worry about the external factors. Similar was the case with Susan, where her worry was not of marrying again, but was unsure how her daughter and her two boys will handle.

I speak to someone over the phone. It was just through a missed call that we happened to interact. I have met him just once but we both know it is impossible to meet or to take any decisions of living together as my children may object. We are hoping once the kids are older, then we can spend our lives together. I haven't been able to share this secret with anyone except my teenage daughter. (*Susan, 37 years, working class*)

Whether the widows overtly protest or not is seen here based on the class and status in the society. For a middle class woman, it is far more difficult to resist gender inequalities than a working class woman, for the same reasons. My study shows that the working class women did not have to evenly bear the stigma of marginalization as the middle income group, especially with regards to their sexuality.

4.4 Challenging the Patriarchal System

Mrs. Mary Roy is an example of a middle class woman I interviewed who challenged the patriarchal system to ensure the inheritance right of Syrian Christian women. She fought her own case and also created a precedent to change the law.

In Christian communities in Kerala, unlike Hindu joint families, the property of the father belonged to him and at his disposal. There was no right whatsoever to the children or to the wife to access property in his absence. Daughters in the family were given *stridanam*¹⁰ at the time of marriage. Her rights to sell or make a will was denied (Susan and Markos 1995). This custom was codified by the Travancore Succession act in 1916 and as a result it was never seen as an unjust system by any of the members of the family. Upon death of the father who left no will, the daughters were only entitled to one fourth of the share of the property or an INR 5000 whichever was less, irrespective of the value or the size of the property which was left behind by the father (Susan and Markos 1995).

In 1984, Mrs. Mary Roy, then 50 years old and widow, running a reputed school, Pallikoodam¹¹, in Kerala, decided to take her brother to court. Her father died intestate and her

¹⁰ Share of property or money or gold given to a girl during the time of her wedding by her parents

¹¹ School started by educator and women's rights activist Mary Roy. For further information, please check <http://www.pallikoodam.org/>

brother asked her to vacate the family house with her two small children. At a time “when I needed help, everyone laughed at me. No lawyer would accept my brief” (Roy 2005: 246). She went to Delhi, to file the case, challenged the Travancore Christian Succession Act as a “violative to her constitutional right to equality” (Roy 2005: 247).

Until then no woman in the Syrian Christian community was ready to even voice or go against the patriarchal norms. The community, including women’s organizations and various club members were worried about the implications and were not happy about this new change. (Susan & Markos 1995). The Church was upset, and feared losing the tithe or *Passaram*¹² (Susan and Markos 1995). “I had to suffer as a woman who has stepped beyond the limits of decorum” (Roy 2005: 248). On a Rock Opera performance day in school, recalls Mrs. Roy how the whole community rose to protest accusing her of all “the unpleasantness involving daughter, wives and sisters” (2005: 248).

Her brother, priests, bishops, rubber barons outside the school echoed,
“Break her legs!
Tie her with chains like an elephant!
Blood will flow down this road!
We shall shatter the school buildings!” (Roy 2005: 248).

She knew then that at the time of filing a case that it may take another good twenty-five years for the verdict to come in favor. She says, she could afford by then to take the whole thing as a joke or a wound which happened years ago, but her fight was for the other the Christian women as a whole and for those who had no house of their own nor an income (Roy 2005: 248).

Says Mrs. Roy, in one of the popular English magazines in India in the 1980s, that if not for the fact that she runs a reputed school and financially independent, she would have been hounded by the family, the bishops and the community. (*Manushi*, as cited in Philips 2003). This required an unusual courage and this undoubtedly paved the way for the future generations of women and gave a ray of hope to stand up to resist gender discrimination and underlying cultural ideologies. According to Philips,

The “moral dilemma” of Syrian Christian women in choosing between their legal rights and their kinship obligations is a manifestation of the tension between the hegemony of traditional cultural norms and religious laws, on the one hand, and the counter-hegemony generated by secular laws, awareness of legal rights and the discourse around gender equality, on the other (2003: 261).

¹² A portion of an amount dedicated to the church from the dowry given to the daughter at the time of her wedding. It is considered as an offering to God and is given to the Church.

The social and legal impact that was achieved through this case she won was twofold. Firstly, she was able to bring about gender equality among the Christian women; secondly, the archaic Travancore Christian Succession Act was repealed and Supreme Court, following Mrs. Roy's case, confirmed that the intestate succession was governed by the Indian Succession Act, 1925 giving equal share to each daughter and sons. (Susan and Markos 1995).

The case of Mary Roy stood against the patriarchal and discriminatory law, showcasing an overt resistance which required an unusual courage and resilience to stand against the Church, and the entire affluent Christian community.

4.5 Concluding Remarks

On profound introspection, what came out was how women were negotiating and using strategic life choices. It was seen in their choices made with regards to their economic situations and the choices to not assert rights or remarry since this would affect their children. This chapter brings out the fourth element of Scott's analysis of gender which is the subjective identity. It brings forth Kabeer's notion of agency of providing people with choices. The amount of choice many of them were able to exercise in terms of access without fear or constraints at a critical juncture were of crucial concern.

This study highlights how agency takes forms of "bargaining and negotiating, deception and manipulation, subversions and resistance as well as more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis" (Kabeer 1999: 438). Overall in terms of concepts of agency, it also brings in Saba Mahmood's notion of agency where one does not have to transform things but exercise or create spaces for one self (2001).

Chapter 5

Conclusion

This thesis examined the lived experiences of young widows and the social construct of widowhood in Kerala among both working and middle class in urban Trivandrum, Kerala. This chapter presents my overall findings and some policy recommendations.

5.1 Overall Analysis

From the interpretations based on my interviews, I found that there is discrimination at many levels against widows. At the societal level, they are being tied down by some of the norms and practices that lead to stigmatization, isolation and social ostracizing. At a family level they are being faced with many constraints with regards to their personal space, raising up children and exclusions from decision making regarding their career and future. For many of them, relationships with in-laws got estranged after being a widow. They are constantly under surveillance and control by both society and family (including in-laws and parents). The discrimination by and large was seen at all these levels including access to resources and a certain amount of verbal abuse and awkward remarks from in-laws and their colleagues. The death of a spouse often leaves the woman in a very challenging position in terms of her “social identity and relationships, her living arrangements and her access to property” (Chen 2000: 313).

5.2 What did they do about it

The widowed women are aware of the discrimination that is prevailing and there is deep anger, resentment and animosity among many. However, many have completely internalized the gender ideology. When women have conformed and accepted their situations the way they are, says Kabeer, it is partly due to the “prevailing gender ideologies and their own internalization of these norms and values” (1988: 108). By such a process, they have remained passive victims by accepting their situations and in a lot of way believing it is the right thing.

Reflecting further one can also come to another understanding. As I listened to them I kept having contradictory feelings- how trapped they were and yet how strong they were. This made me think further and I realized that a recurrent theme throughout the interviews was their financial dependence and the concern these women had about their children. Their acceptance then could be interpreted in another way. These widows were actually negotiating the constraints and their passive adherence was a strategic life choice to ensure future welfare for their children.

The widows did not have much support to strengthen their “fall-back position” (Agarwal 1994) as they were not economically independent and lacked resources. Their absence of not questioning as Agarwal reminds us, should not be accepted as “evidence of women’s lack of questioning or perception of inequality” (as cited in Philips 2003: 249). As has been pointed out, women use strategic choices “within a set of concrete constraints” called the “patriarchal

bargain" (Kandiyoti 1988: 275). A woman's "gendered subjectivity" is shaped by the influence of these "patriarchal bargains" (Kandiyoti 1988: 275). They are often caught in a paradoxical situation between pressures from the family, society and their own well-being. Their docile and overt compliance with their ongoing situation does not mean they are willingly accepting off these practices, rather they were using covert forms of resistance in order to adapt to the nature of the patriarchal systems.

Although they are suppressed to a large extent in terms of mobility and sexuality, they are also seen taking calculated tactical actions in order to create a space of their own despite many obstacles. As Certeau notes,

A tactic is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus. No delimitation of an exteriority, then, provides it with the condition necessary for autonomy. The place of a tactic is the space of the other ... it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it ... it operates in isolated actions, blow by blow. It takes advantage of 'opportunities' and depends on them ... this gives a tactic more mobility, to be sure, but a mobility that must accept the chance offerings of the moment.... tactics are the "art of the weak..." (1988: 36-37).

The limited expressions of overt agency and suppression or transmutation of their own desires was hence a choice albeit one that did not challenge patriarchal structures. This study has brought out the need to analyze agency in a much more nuanced manner. Changes in their circumstances through some form of public action could create the enabling conditions for these young widows to develop the full range of capabilities for a flourishing life.

5.3 Recommended Public Action

My study highlights and represents the problems faced by these young widows. It emerges that support needed for their self- reliance and happiness requires action at the family, societal and state level. It should consist of economic, skills acquisition, job creations, and mobilization and support to strengthen their bargaining power.

Economic - There are many barriers to ownership and access to property and resources. To assert their rights, there was always contestation within and outside of their household. The widows from the working class have a pension scheme enabling them to get just enough rations from the Public Distribution System (PDS). But for a middle class young woman, there are no pensions nor any social security measures provided. This calls for an action to universalize the pension scheme based on an eligibility criterion. If the husband had a government job, or has taken a good life insurance, they do get covered. In the absence of both, there should be a significant source of support for the dependents.

Employment – Most widows were unemployed. There should be a plan to address the basic survival of these young widows. A skill training or vocational program based on their educational qualifications will benefit most of them. It would boost their confidence. More

organizations like SEWA and Kudumbashree¹³ that tries to empower them through various skill trainings can come forward. Most middle class women were working at the time of being interviewed. But it was not enough to be economically independent.

Societal attitude- It is not just the economic or employment security, but the dignity and well-being of these women that needs special care. The sudden feeling of being isolated affects their psychological and social well-being. There is a need to create more space to make young widows visible. There is a widow association, named Judith forum for widows in Cochin. They undergo workshops and counselling sessions for young women who are unable to handle their life. More collective support and more such organizations can empower women to live a life of dignity and self-respect. Foundation similar to Loomba Foundation¹⁴ endorsed by celebrities, can be great initiatives. Media and celebrities can bring awareness of the deprivation and promote the fundamental freedom and human rights of widows.

5.4 Conclusion

The autonomy experienced by women in Kerala before the 20th century has faded away with the institutionalization of the patriarchal system. The loss of social status and a weaker economic status was seen as the most common factor among all the eighteen widows. The social status of a woman is seen through a man and in his absence she experiences a “social death” (U.N 2001: 6). Deep within they desire to be resourceful, resilient and capable of managing things without having to face the vulnerabilities of being young in a male dominated society. In reality women are seen as “second class citizens” (Nussbaum 2000: 4) despite the constitutional democracy and in spite of boasting high literacy, high gender development and health indicators thereby reinforcing the ‘gender paradox’.

The ‘gender paradox’ points to a big gap between the gender development and lack of women’s rights in terms of the subtler “qualitative indicators, such as agency (power with), autonomy (power to), self-confidence (power within) and mobility” (Erwer 2003: 303). My study adds to this paradox by showing how in spite of being from different backgrounds, young widows as a special vulnerable group still face discrimination.

¹³ Launched by the govt. of Kerala to wipe out poverty and to empower women through concerted community actions. For more, please check: <http://www.kudumbashree.org/?q=home>

¹⁴ A global NGO for widows was launched at the United Nations in New York by Lord Loomba. In India it is endorsed by famous Bollywood celebrities. For more, please check: <http://theloombafoundation.org/home/>

According to Nussbaum, all human associations are governed by laws and institutions and she says it will be critical to look into how much of fostering is being done and also the impediment it does as well. (2001. It is important they feel a sense of worth living their future lives without feeling they are a more of a hindrance to the society, family and state as a whole. Their economic freedom, employment opportunities, capacity for sexual expressions, freedom and mobility are their basic fundamental capabilities which should not be truncated.

I conclude by saying young widows whom I interviewed are being denied and losing out much on their overall socio-economic well-being. Family, says Nussbaum, cannot be denied to be one of the major causes of the “oppression of women” (2001: 243). Very often she is “treated not as an end in herself, but as an adjunct or instrument of the needs of others...rather than as a source of agency and worth in her own right” (Nussbaum 2001: 243). When family and other institutions are shaped by public policies (Nussbaum 2001) and the basic requirement of social justice are provided it leaves them with plenty of space to determine their course of life.

A woman’s space could be widened but without compromising her “womanliness” says Devika (2006: 45). The ‘ideal’ woman concept demands a paradigm shift. Neither should a widow’s capabilities be tied down nor should the state and the public action be negligent about their overall freedom and well-being. The image of a Kerala woman as subservient, weak and domesticated will only be circumstantiated if we are still in a constant state of slumber. It is the need of the hour to collectively work towards adding the essential ingredients of what is really necessary in building a ‘Kerala Model’ by wiping out the ‘gender paradox’ tied to it.

Appendix 1: Profile of middle class widows

Sl. No	Name (Pseudonym)	Age	Widowed Age	Religion	No: of children	If currently working (Yes /NO)	Place of Stay
1	Tara	44	38	Hindu	One	Yes	Natal home
2	Laila	45	27	Christian	Two	Yes	Independent
3	Neena	45	42	Christian	Two	Yes	Independent
4	Sreelakshmi	44	38	Hindu	Two	Yes	Natal home
5	Anju	45	40	Hindu	One	Yes	Natal home
6	Aadra	45	31	Hindu	One	Yes	Natal home
7	Rema	27	25	Hindu	One	Yes	Natal home
8	Preetha	45	42	Christian	Two	No	Independent with support from parent's home
9	Vasantha	43	27	Hindu	Two	Yes	Independent (mom stays with her)
10	Sumy	45	31	Hindu	One	Yes	Independent (support from in-laws)

Appendix 2: Working Class Women Profile:

Sl No	Name (Pseudonym)	Age	Widowed Age	Religion	No: of Children	If currently working (Yes/No)	Widow Pension	Place of stay
1	Sindhu	39	33	Hindu	One	No	Yes	Natal home
2	Nilima	43	38	Hindu	Two	Yes (not any full time job)	Yes	House built by husband in his property
3	Ajitha	33	32	Hindu	Two	No	Applied, not yet received	Built a home in a plot given by her parents while her husband was alive
4	Susan	37	32	Christian	Two	Yes	Yes	Rented house
5	Tripti	41	26	Hindu	Two	Yes	Yes	Rented house
6	Sunitha	36	27	Hindu	One	No	Yes	Natal home
7	Seema	37	32	Christian	Two	No	Yes	Natal home
8	Nirmala	38	28	Hindu	Two	Yes	Yes	Natal home

Appendix 3: Key informant Profile:

Sl. No	Name	Profession	Religion	Place
1	Sree Renjini	Program Officer, Kerala Social Justice Department	Hindu	Trivandrum
2	Mary Roy	Educator/Activist	Christian	Kottayam
3	Leela Gulati	Professor, CDS	NA	Trivandrum
4	Leela Menon	Journalist, Indian Express	Hindu	Cochin
5	Beena Joseph	Heads Judith Forum of Widows Association	Christian	Kalady, Cochin
6	Vijaya Mohan Pillai	Professor, CDS	Hindu	Trivandrum

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