

Loneliness among Divorced and Widowed Women: A comparative study of Hindus and Muslims

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Abstract: For a woman, losing a spouse either to death or separation, affects her mentally and emotionally leading to feelings of loneliness and many more. The physical presence of one's better-half gets completely lost and this affects women in many ways. The overall purpose of the present study is to comprehend the phenomenon of divorce and widowhood in Indian context and examine its impact on loneliness among women belonging to Hindu and Muslim community. The sample of the study comprised of 128 women (32 Hindu widows, 32 Muslim widows, 32 Hindu divorcees & 32 Muslim divorcees). The statistical measures of mean, SD and ANOVA were applied to analyse the data. The results revealed no significant difference among the groups regardless of their religious beliefs; except for the Muslim widows, who reported significantly lesser degree of loneliness.

Key Words: Loneliness, Indian Widow, Indian Divorcee, Women.

1. INTRODUCTION:

A lady is regarded well settled and complete in the Indian society only when she has her better-half with her. On the other hand, if for any reason she is not staying with her husband or she loses her spouse to death, even then instead of sympathy the society holds her responsible for the misfortune. This society where women are worshipped in the names of Goddesses on one hand, while on the other it is said that paradise is under her feet, are kept out of religious ceremonies the reason being that they don't have a man by their side.

2. WIDOWS:

Widows don't only suffer the loss of their spouse but they also get trapped into a life full of turmoil and transitions. Mastey (2009) described widowhood in India as a moment in a woman's life that is definitive and tragic, where the death of her spouse strips away her own identity. As these women are not very well educated due to low literacy rate in India, they are not left with many options in terms of occupation. Thousands of widows are disowned by their relatives and thrown out of their homes in the context of land and inheritance disputes. Their options, given a lack of education and training, are mostly limited to becoming exploited, unregulated, domestic labourers (often as house slaves within the husband's family), or turning to begging or prostitution (Bill I, 2006). Indian widows are often regarded as "evil eyes," the purveyors of ill fortune and unwanted burdens on poor families (UN Division for the Advancement of Women, 2000). Widows are still considered inauspicious, looked down upon and many a times shunned out of their homes, Vrindavan is a good example of this where widows reside trying to adjust with the wrath of the society. In scenarios like these, the persons sufferings tend to decrease as religious beliefs and practices leads to the formation of a cognitive framework that in turn strengthens the persons purpose and meaning to face the trauma (Pargament, 1997). Specific prayers, behaviours and funeral ceremonies are prescribed in all religious traditions in order to deal with death. This not only gives them a sense of belonging to a broader community but also comforts the mourners (Wuthnow et al., 1980).

3. DIVORCE:

Divorce as an end to an unhappy union is becoming more acceptable. There is ample evidence which indicates that divorce is becoming less of a stigma and that couples as well as society are accepting that marriages can break. Studies show that it is mostly women who suffer physical and emotional abuse from their spouse and his family. Today's woman is no longer willing to tolerate any kind of physical and mental abuse and thus divorce is considered as a relief for them from an unfortunate relationship (Siganporia, 1993).

From a large number of potential life events, divorce has been rated as one of the most stressful, with a large general impact on the life situation of those who experience it (Dohrenwend *et al.*, 1978; Holmes and Rahe, 1967; Gahler, 2006). It is mostly women who post-divorce undergo the feelings of loneliness, depression and social rejection. Recent data shows that this scenario is fast changing and divorce rates are on an increase in India. A survey shows that over the past four years, the divorce rate in Delhi has almost doubled. Metro cities like Bangalore, Mumbai, and Chennai are also showing similar trends. Kerala, known to be the state with the highest literacy levels has experienced an increase of divorce rate by 350% in the last 10 years¹. Women post-divorce tend to get less support

from family and friends when compared with men in the similar situation. Most of the serious economic problems faced by women with children in India are caused by marital disruptions. Studies on separated, divorced and deserted women show the continuing difficulties these women face in providing food, clothing and shelter for themselves and their children and also how they live at a bare subsistence level (Choudhary, 1988; Kumari, 1989).

When discussing the concept of divorce in Hindus and Muslims, it is important to explain its religious underpinnings. In order to understand the concept of divorce, the nature of marriage should be taken into consideration as mentioned in scriptures. Hindu marriage consists of a sacrament and is dissoluble. Divorce received a legal sanction after the enactment of Hindu Marriage and Divorce Act of 1955. On the other hand, Muslim marriage is a sacred contract. According to the Islamic view, marriage is considered as a social institution which is given utmost importance and which exhorts man to marry (Kidwai, 2005). Termination of marriage by way of divorce also called 'talaq' is explicitly recognized by the Islamic Law. All these factors affects the psychological conditions of widows and divorcees, therefore the feeling of loneliness engulfs many of them.

4. LONELINESS:

Loneliness in a layman's terminology may be regarded as the feeling of being alone. A person can be sitting in a room completely packed with people and still feel lonely. Theoretically, loneliness has been defined as Perlman and Peplau (1982) "The unpleasant experience that occurs when a person's network of social relationships is deficient in some important way, either quantitatively or qualitatively." Loneliness can also be defined by Sullivan (1953) as "the exceedingly unpleasant and driving experience connected with inadequate discharge of the need for human intimacy, for interpersonal intimacy." From the earliest studies, Loneliness is reported as a feature of widowhood as the fear of being alone and loss of self-esteem as women are two fears that women suffer from (Atchley 1975; Bowling & Cartwright 1982; Lopata 1980; Parkes 1972). According to Lund, Caserta, & Dimond (1993) loneliness was the greatest difficulty faced by older widowed people.

5. OBJECTIVES:

The present study aims to investigate the observed phenomenon of widowhood and divorce in the given socio-cultural context and conclude how it affects perceived loneliness among Hindu and Muslim women from Indian region.

6. HYPOTHESES:

- Ha1: There will be no significant difference between Hindu and Muslim divorced women on scale of loneliness.
- Ha2: There will be no significant difference between Hindu and Muslim widows on scale of loneliness.
- Ha3: There will be no significant difference between divorced and widow Hindu women on scale of loneliness.
- Ha4: There will be no significant difference between divorced and widow Muslim women on scale of loneliness.

7. METHOD :

7.1 SAMPLE AND PROCEDURE :

Subjects of this study were 128 women (32 Hindu widows, 32 Muslim widows, 32 Hindu divorcees & 32 Muslim divorcees) recruited from various NGOs through snowballing sampling technique. The sample age range was between 20 to 50 years. The scale was administered on the subjects with their consent. After permission had been granted, survey questionnaires were handed over to the ladies, identified as samples in the study. They were asked to complete measures as correctly and honestly as possible, they were supervised by the researcher.

7.2 TOOL:

Loneliness was measured by the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3) (Russell, 1996)¹⁵. A 20-item scale designed to measure one's subjective feelings of loneliness as well as feelings of social isolation. Participants rate each item on a scale from 1 (Never) to 4 (Often). This measure is a revised version of the original UCLA Loneliness Scale. The main reason for this revision was to make 10 of the 20 original items reverse scored. This scale has been revised again to simplify the wording.

8. STATISTICAL ANALYSIS:

The data were analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 20 for Windows. Prior to data entry, every form was checked for completeness and consistency. Descriptive statistics (including means, standard deviations, range, skewness and kurtosis) were calculated for all scale. Associations between loneliness, marital status

and religious background were investigated with ANOVA.

9. RESULTS :

Table 9.1: Descriptive Statistics of Loneliness among Different groups.

Groups		N	Mean	SD	Range	Skewness	Kurtosis
DIVORCED	Hindu	32	49.84	1.34	5	-.37	-.35
	Muslim	32	50.40	5.07	21	.21	.25
WIDOWS	Hindu	32	49.93	1.29	17	.02	-.41
	Muslim	32	46.84	8.71	32	-.13	.41

Table 9.2: Summary of One Way ANOVA among different groups

Source of Variation	Sum Of Squares	df	Mean Squares	F	Sig.
Between Groups	254.46	3	84.82	3.22	.025
Within Groups	3262.03	124	26.30		
Total	3516.49	127			

One way analysis of variance (Table 2) was carried out to find the significance of difference among different groups (Divorced Hindus, Divorced Muslims, Widow Hindus and Widow Muslims) of women on loneliness. The results revealed significant difference among different groups of ladies on loneliness scale (df = 3,124, F = 3.22, p < .025).

Table 9.3: Multiple Comparisons of Means for Different Groups on Loneliness.

I Group	J Group	Mean Differences I-J	SEM	Sig.
Divorced Hindu	Divorced Muslim	-.56	1.28	.97
Divorced Hindu	Widow Hindu	-.09	1.28	1.00
Widow Hindu	Widow Muslims	3.39	1.28	.08
Widow Muslim	Divorced Muslim	-3.56	1.28	.03

Tukey Post hoc test (Table 3.3) was applied for comparing the means of different groups on the variable as significant differences among the groups were observed. The overall inspection of values in tables 3.1 indicates that Divorced Hindu ladies (M = 49.84) scored slightly lesser on loneliness as compared to Divorced Muslim (M = 50.40), while Widow Muslim women (M = 46.84) reported significantly lower loneliness as compared to Widow Hindu women (M = 49.93).

There was significant difference in loneliness observed between widows and divorced Muslim women. Significant differences were not observed among other groups.

10. DISCUSSION:

Both divorce and widowhood are significantly distressing events in the live of an individual, there stressors are further multiplied when an individual belongs to a certain culture and region. The main objective of the study was to compare the divorced and widowed women of Hindu and Muslim community in the perception of their feeling of loneliness. The results indicated that both the groups, regardless of their religious beliefs reported a high in loneliness scale, this is supported by the studies carried out Dykstra & De Jong Gierveld, (1999)¹⁶; Samuelsson, Andersson, & Hagberg, (1998)¹⁷, who reported that higher levels of loneliness are associated with divorce and widowhood, even when there is a shift in the view of Indian society and these marital status (widowhood and divorcees) are becoming more acceptable.

Statistically there was no significant difference between Hindu and Muslim divorced women and Hindu widows. However, there was a significant difference between widowed Muslim and divorced Muslim ladies. Maybe these difference in results could be explained by the social support that Muslim widows received or perhaps it was

their religious beliefs and practices that helped in decreased suffering and strengthen one's purpose and meaning in the face of trauma, as concluded by Pargament, 1997. Level of loneliness reported by Divorced Muslim ladies was observed to be the highest amongst the four groups.

Therefore irrespective of one's religion divorced and widowed women are quite susceptible to loneliness as observed in the present study

11. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY :

- The sample size was limited only to two cities and restrictions of time and resources; it could not be done in other cities. Thus, the results cannot be generalized.
- Collecting data from male divorcee and widowers would have added deeper insight into this topic of discussion.
- Though socio-economic status is another important demographic variable, it could not be considered for the study.

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