

Patterns of Living Arrangement: A Structural Link to Social Support of Rural Widows

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ABSTRACT On widowhood an individual's living arrangement gains significance as it provides an opportunity for support and has an edge in specific areas of support due to close physical proximity. In Indian cultural setting joint arrangements are valued and demonstrate family solidarity but patterns of living arrangement and factors influencing it among rural widows is a potential area yet to be explored. The paper traces the effect of cultural aspects, economic affordability, demographic availability, and personal factors on family structure. The study is explorative and descriptive in nature and in total 616 widows were interviewed through purposive sampling technique. The findings indicate the predominance of sub-nuclear families irrespective of variations in economic status. Joint living arrangements are relatively higher among widows in wet region. In dry belt, economic position of widows and fewer options control the type of living arrangement but in higher economic region service requirements in intensive farming has a significant influence. In addition, age, educational level, household headship, dependency of children and forewarned death is closely linked to living arrangement.

INTRODUCTION

Life events, particularly widowhood is traumatic for almost everyone experiencing it but little is known about their adaptation and degree of integration into the community. An important structural link, which effects social integrative process, is living arrangement, conditioning one's access to social contact, a special case of close proximity.

There is greater propensity of divorced and widowed women to head their own households (Chevan and Korson, 1975; Ross and Sawhill, 1975; Marnick and Bane, 1980) rather than joining someone and this has a direct consequence for an increase in single parent households. An individual's living arrangement defines and constrains the nature of social interaction with others in the proximate social environment and access to social contact. Co-residence facilitates

exchange and enhances individual adaptation to the stresses of life and major life changes (Berkman and Syme, 1979; Mueller, 1980; Kahn and Antonucci, 1980; House et al., 1982). Living arrangement is acted upon as a vehicle for demonstrating family solidarity and is a critical test for the nature and strength of family relationships within which widowed operate.

The residential pattern rests upon the tradition of independence or dependence in various spheres of life and support provided by society. On marriage being disrupted, a woman has to make decisions about where to live while access to resources for woman is more dependent on living arrangement when compared to men (Rahman, 1990).

A basic component of residential choice is the decision whether to live alone as the head of household, to move with relatives, or to share a household with non-relatives and by whether or not the woman can afford to live alone (Sweet, 1972). In addition living arrangement is dependent on several demographic and social factors such as age, sex, educational attainment, income, labor force status, fertility etc. Researchers in western setting have noted the tendency of single women, particularly those heading households to move away from joint living arrangements (Ross and Sawhill, 1975; Chevan and Korson, 1975). Is it true of Indian widows too?

From the data obtained from a larger study on single women it was observed that widows in wet region are economically better off compared to widows in dry region. Agriculture is the major source of income for wet land widows while agricultural labour and animal husbandry are major sources of subsistence in dry land. Agricultural operations are intensive in wet region and the need and type of support varies between landowning and landless widows. Increased interaction associated with co-residence

increases exchange of resources and as well exacerbates tensions as it improves relationships. Hence an attempt is made to identify whether intensity of agricultural operations in different economic regions bring in changes in patterns of living arrangement.

Traditionally widows were confined to the house for atleast a year as a custom and avoided social functions. The interim period, usually served as a grieving period and were assured of support from close kin particularly parents to stay along with them. At present changes are observed in traditional restrictions and living arrangement patterns of widows in view of increasing role of formal organizations in social and economic life of rural communities. As a result widows have become more mobile and structural changes in family during post widowhood stage are distinct as joint arrangements are currently observed only in times of crisis. Are patterns of living arrangements permanent or temporary among rural widows? Based on these research questions the paper examines the patterns of living arrangement of widows in dry and wet regions of similar cultural groups and factors influencing it with specific focus on cultural aspects, economic affordability and demographic availability.

The data is part of larger study on support system and network pattern of single women in two rural communities - dry and wet region. The study was carried out in Erode and Coimbatore districts of western Tamil Nadu. Widows were identified and interviewed from three clusters - Perundurai, Gobichettipalayam and Pollachi taluk, of which the former is a dry region and latter two are wet regions with multi-crop farming. Widows irrespective of age belonging to communities prohibiting remarriage and widowed for atleast one year formed the unit of study. The study is exploratory and descriptive in nature and purposive sampling technique is adopted. Village Administrative Officials and Agricultural Extension Officials were helpful in identifying the widows. A total of 616 widows were interviewed with the help of an interview schedule between January 1996 and November 1997. Factors associated with living arrangement are identified through correlation and regression technique is adopted to explain their independent effects.

PERSONAL PROFILE

All respondents of the study are Hindus and a majority belong to Kongu Vellalar Gounder community, distinct for its stringent norms and rituals towards widowhood. A notable proportion of the widows are young, under forty five years and the mean age of widows in dry belt is 42.30 years and 43.62 years in wet belt. One half of the widows in dry region and all widows in wet region are landowners. Agriculture in dry land is largely dependent on monsoon whereas land in wet areas is irrigated through canals and lift irrigation.

Farming is the primary source of income for widows in wet land while agricultural labour and animal husbandry are major sources of subsistence for widows in dry region. About two-thirds in both regions have been residents of the same place for more than ten years. Illiteracy is widespread among dry region widows compared to wet land widows. Considerable proportions of widows in both regions are debted owing to agricultural investment, educational expenses, and occupational investment for children.

Almost all marriages were arranged by elders and cross cousin marriages are highly preferred in the region. Marriage distance is short ensuring support accessibility. About two-third of widows in wet region were married between 18 and 24 years whereas a similar proportion in dry region were married between 15 to 17 years. About eighty percent in both regions were widowed at an early age (before 45 years) and about half of the widows are recent widows (less than ten years) and experienced widowhood with least forewarning. As to spousal age difference about two-fifths were married to spouses older by 10 years. Spouses of widows predominantly practiced agriculture and self-employment.

PATTERNS OF CURRENT LIVING ARRANGEMENT

Changes in type of living arrangement for widows - nuclear, joint and extended, usually proceeds in various stages, beginning even before widowhood and sometimes in the later part of widowhood. The composition of household members at the time of widowhood

is likely to determine the support structure after widowhood. A little above two-thirds in both regions were living in nuclear households at the time of widowhood and relatively more number of widows in wet belt were living along with parents-in-law compared to widows in dry region. About a fifth in dry area resided in extended units supplemented by single parents, parents-in-law, stepchildren and single siblings.

One of the direct consequences observed in widowhood is changes in pattern of living arrangement. Three broad patterns have been observed (a) living alone (b) living with unmarried children or filial households and (c) living with other relatives such as primary consanguinal or affinal kin. Sixty widows in dry region and twenty-five widows in wet region are currently living alone and of these forty-four childless widows were staying alone. Two-fourth of widows in wet land and one half of widows in dry land live with unmarried children. Apart from these it is noted that 39.74 per cent of widows in wet region and 4.85 per cent of widows in dry region live in joint arrangements. One fifth of the widows in dry land compared to one-tenth of widows in wet area link their living with married children, predominantly sons, a reflection of cultural norms.

Major reasons cited for solitary residence are,

employment, educational or marital migration of children, conflictual relationship with children or close social ties and the sanctity attached to the place of husband. Older widows expressed their preference to stay alone specifically to retain greater autonomy and provide opportunity for all her children to visit frequently. Widows with only female children attach greater dignity to staying alone rather than with sons-in-law as per the cultural norms.

CHANGES IN LIVING ARRANGEMENT AFTER WIDOWHOOD

One half of the widows in both regions continued with living arrangements that existed prior to widowhood, particularly those with consanguinal kin, married children and a few with affines where spouses of widows were the only sons. The remaining have altered the household composition either voluntarily for want of support or due to conflict. Children's marriage and death of elderly household members also triggered structural changes in family.

A considerable proportion in wet region (46.25 per cent) changed the place of residence after widowhood and many have shifted more than once. Majority moved to consanguines family and a few have joined affines and children's

Table 1: Current living arrangement

Type of living arrangement	Dry		Wet	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Alone	60	22.33	25	8.14
With unmarried children	163	52.76	121	39.42
With married children	64	20.71	39	12.70
Joint family	22	7.12	122	39.74
Total	309	100.00	307	100.00

Table 2: Sources involved in decision making

Decision makers	Dry		Wet	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Self	236	76.38	262	85.34
Consanguinal	53	17.15	35	11.40
Affinal	4	1.30	5	1.63
Children	10	3.24	4	1.30
Secondary kin	2	0.65	1	0.33
Non-kin	4	1.29	0	0.00
Total	309	100.00	307	100.00

Table 3: Correlates of living arrangement in dry and wet region.

Variables	Dry	Wet
Age	0.3913***	0.1388*
Age at widowhood	0.1508**	0.1020
Household headship	0.3810***	0.3103**
Availability of employed child	0.1511**	0.2001**
Availability of children below 1 years	-0.1272*	-0.1548**
Role change	0.6663***	0.0061
Span of widowhood	0.1480**	0.0106
Forewarning	0.1176*	0.1049
Tenure of dwelling	0.2975***	0.1637**
Land ownership	0.0868	0.0012
Availability of mother	0.1767**	0.0530
Availability of father	0.1257*	-0.0728
Availability of brother	0.0213	0.0896
Availability of sister	0.0625	0.0885
Availability of mother-in-law	0.1449*	-0.1240*
Availability of father-in-law	0.2088***	-0.0896
Availability of brother-in-law	0.0861	0.0256
Availability of sister-in-law	0.0114	-0.0560

*** Significant at 0.01 level

** Significant at 0.05 level

* Significant at 0.10 level

family. Major reasons in shifting of residences were to facilitate support flow to widows to overcome grief, provide child-care and security and to be physically closer to supportive persons. Movements to farmhouses for effective farming or to villages for children's occupation

are economically motivated and threat to safety to stay in farmhouses has influenced the living arrangement of widows. Notable proportions have changed residence to extricate from persisting conflictual relationships within household. Construction of new houses and movement from one rented house to another also resulted in changes in place of residence for a few. Some have also shifted to natal places in view of parental property available, particularly when respondents had no male siblings.

Sources Involved in Decision-making

A decisive step to change the living arrangement is an important event and is governed by the preference, options available in terms of kin availability and affordability on part of those with whom widows plan to reside and the economic position of widows are other compelling reasons for a change. In dry belt, the economic affordability on the part of widows and close kin controls the living arrangement while in wet region the intensive service support required for widows in farming activities control the living arrangement. In wet region one-fourth decided their living arrangement individually or with mutual consent but seldom allowed others to decide totally and three-fourth of dry region

Table 4: Regression of living arrangement on personal, situational and child related factors among dry land widows

Variables	Co-efficient	t-value	R Square	F-value
Age	0.2849***	4.773	30.13	32.78
Age at widowhood	-0.0226	-0.380		
Educational status	-0.4670**	-2.704		
Household headship	0.1328***	9.587	19.52	12.21
Availability of employed child	0.1459*	2.530		
Availability of unmarried child	0.0875	-3.101		
Availability of children below 14 yr.	-0.0572	-0.999	62.61	49.91
Span of widowhood	0.0231	0.576		
Forewarning	0.1056**	2.849		
Tenure of dwelling	0.1680**	3.965	6.73	4.37
Land ownership	-0.0191	0.510		
Availability of mother	-0.0589	-1.003		
Availability of father	-0.1238	-2.095	6.73	4.37
Availability of brother	-0.0278	-0.497		
Availability of mother-in-law	-0.0313	-0.481		
Availability of father-in-law	-0.1574	-2.409		

N = 309

*** Significant at 0.01 level

** Significant at 0.05 level

* Significant at 0.10 level

Table 5: Regression of living arrangement on personal, situational and child related factors among wet land widows

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Co-efficient</i>	<i>t-value</i>	<i>R Square</i>	<i>F-value</i>
Age	0.0501	0.716		
Age at widowhood	-0.0297	-0.428	18.95	17.66
Educational Status	-0.1441**	-2.685		
Household headship	0.3721**	6.845		
Availability of employed child	0.1572**	2.624		
Availability of unmarried child	0.0688	1.106	24.56	4.85
Availability children below 14 yr.	-0.1203*	-1.866		
Span of widowhood	0.0016	-0.033		
Forewarning	0.0969*	1.946		
Tenure of dwelling	0.1343*	2.584	27.96	12.72
Land ownership	0.0661	1.321		
Availability of mother	-0.0086	-0.141		
Availability of father	-0.0472	-0.766		
Availability of brother	0.0850	1.483	2.69	1.67
Availability of mother-in-law	-0.0971	-1.579		
Availability of father-in-law	-0.0377	-0.610		

N = 307

*** Significant at 0.01 level

** Significant at 0.05 level

* Significant at 0.10 level

widows also decided their own living arrangement. Widows in dry region have fewer options and in both groups involvement of consanguines is high.

In wet block about a third of widow's consanguine ties joined the living arrangement of widows immediately after widowhood in accordance with normative expectations and ritual necessity, of whom parents and male siblings occupy a significant space. Such living arrangements were specifically observed for younger widows. Nearly two-fifths of respondents had close kin staying with them for more than a year and the remaining stayed only for a short duration of less than six months. Refusal of close kin to join the living arrangement of widows is a potential factor for strained relationship with consanguines and on the other hand refusal by widows to stay with affines, triggers conflict with affinal kin.

Determinants of Living Arrangement

The dependent variable in this analysis refers to independent (those living alone and those living with married and unmarried children) and joint (those living with other kin members apart from children and their and their family) living arrangements after widowhood. The

influence of opportunity structure (availability of kin), characteristics of widow such as age, age at marriage, educational status, labour force participation, non earning members and economic resources like family income, landownership with other situational variables like forewarning of death, tenure of dwelling at a particular place on living arrangement are assessed through correlation and regression analysis.

Correlates of living arrangement shows that age, availability of children below 14 years, availability of employed child, tenure of dwelling and household headship status are significantly associated with joint arrangement in both wet and dry region. Age at widowhood, role changes, availability of parents and parents-in-law in dry region and availability of mother-in-law in wet region are significantly associated with type of living arrangement.

Regression analysis indicates that among the personal factors, age, age at widowhood, education and household headship bring about 30 per cent variation in the composition of households in dry land and 18 per cent variation in wet block. It is observed that with increasing age widows in dry region tend to live in sub-nuclear families comprising of children either married or unmarried, which is in accordance with

cultural expectations and protect their self-esteem. Asexual status is assigned to elderly widows and all widows who live alone are in their late middle age or old age.

Widows heading households live in sub nuclear units in both regions while women dependent on others live in extended arrangements and are less likely to enjoy autonomy in the economic and social spheres. Widows heading households are usually in the middle or older age group and have limited availability of obligatory kin. Widows assume headship roles as they gradually gain experience in management of farm and family related matters and in addition there is greater probability of having adult children; thus independent living is more common among those heading households.

Widows with higher educational level significantly establish joint households in both wet and dry regions. Widows with better educational background are from higher income group. They are socialized for stereotypic activities, and are less experienced in management of day to day activities and require more support for male oriented tasks and the affordability of close kin foster joint living. Apart from these, obligatory kin of widows are required as a custom to be present until the widow's recoup. In case of failure, the consanguineous kin in higher income families would be looked down and reflect as a weakness for widows when they are not able to mobilize the support. Educated widows maintain smooth interpersonal relationship and avoid tension and strain in relationships, which facilitate supportive members to join widows household.

Child related factors, an in-built support system in Indian setting explain about nineteen per cent towards formation of sub-nuclear structures in dry belt and twenty four per cent in wet belt. Widows with very young children (i.e.) below 14 years in wet region are more prone to live in joint living arrangements. The demands of dependent children make it essential to tap full-time support from members outside family, whereas having an employed or co-providing child, literate and adult child positively influence the formation of sub-nuclear households. Having an employed child at home also influences

the formation of sub-nuclear units in both regions. Availability of employed child implies presence of adult children and hence widows stay with their children.

The situational factors closely associated with cultural and background factors are powerful in determining household configuration to a large extent. Sixty two per cent of variation in dry block and twenty seven per cent of variation in wet block regarding formation of sub nuclear or isolated households are explained by these variables. Among the situational factors, forewarned death of spouses and tenure of dwelling contribute to the formation of nuclear households of widows in both wet and dry region. Widows forewarned of spouses death are mentally prepared for the calamity and are experienced in running the household during spouse's illness and hence nuclear living arrangements are common among them. Widows living in a particular place for longer duration also live in nuclear families. The stability of ties and presence of supportive persons in the neighbourhood reduce likelihood to form joint arrangements.

Presence of primary kinfolk contributes to alteration in household arrangement by about six per cent in dry block and two per cent in wet block. The direction of relationship shows that widows are least likely to establish households with siblings or sibling-in-law except for certain outliers. They are determined by the intensity of the problem for widows, availability and affordability and only when families of siblings or siblings-in-law are quite receptive. It is found that mere availability of kin does not foster joint living arrangement but further studies could probe on the proximity of close kin and the interpersonal relationship between them.

CONCLUSION

Sub-nuclear families are the predominant pattern in the post widowhood stage. Of those living in joint arrangements, greater proportion of widows in wet region live in joint arrangements, particularly with consanguines. Changes in household composition are strategies to seek stable support or to extricate from conflictual relationship or they are part of normal

structural changes due to marriage of supportive kin or on death of an elderly kin. In wet belt service requirements and cultural expectation plays a major role in formation of joint arrangements, whereas in dry belt, economic position of widows and their kin and fewer alternate options available govern the widows living arrangement.

Age, educational level, household headship, dependency of children, employment of children and forewarned death significantly influence living arrangement of widows. Despite many widows being privileged to live in joint arrangements, the temporary nature of such arrangements for some, with an air of uncertainty and strain in joint arrangements for a few are a matter of growing concern. Living with either of the close kinred groups alter the quality and quantity of support extended by other groups. Hence a deeper understanding of widows as self-reliant, household reliant, and network reliant are required. The areas of specialization of support by various kin groups differs based on living arrangement and hence further studies could emphasize on the patterns of support drawn from various sources which would aid in understanding family relations in a period of crises.

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