

Patterns and Processes of Conflict with Affines and Consanguines - An Examination of Social Well-being of Rural Widows in Western Tamil Nadu

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KEY WORDS Family Life. Widowhood. Rural Communities. South India.

ABSTRACT The shape and character of family life undergo change or transformation to a large extent through social networks, specifically after traumatic life events like widowhood. Widowhood destabilises normal life in the absence of the core supporter and stability is restored by substitutive networks. Under these circumstances the type of network supportive or disruptive, or loss of network has a vital role in the well-being of widows. Though information pertaining to supportive network and its freight in various dimensions has been well documented in the literature, prevalence of kin relations and the issue of conflict particularly with available obligatory kin - affinal and consanguineous kin in rural communities remains unexplored. The paper focuses on the patterns and processes of conflict prevailing between rural widow's and their affinal and consanguineous kin. An attempt is also made to identify the importance of finer distinctions in the measures of conflict. The data utilised for the paper is drawn from a larger study on 'Rural Widow's Social Support and Network'. The study was carried out in two rural blocks of Western Tamil Nadu with multicrop farming. By using purposive sampling technique 307 widows were identified and interviewed with the help of a schedule. Village Administrative Officials and Agricultural Extension workers were the main source of informants for identification.

Conflict permeates personal relationships with kin, both affinal and consanguineous, usually arising out of a gap between the perceived and received support. The processes involved in the manifestation of conflict and the major antecedents of antagonism between widows and their affines, usually relating to sharing common property and resources and their inheritance of due share, are described. In association with proximity, denial of cooperation vis-a-vis sharing common resources entails conflict with their affines frequently. On the other hand, once the widows demand property from the parental side, a serious reconsideration of traditional obligations to widows on the part of consanguines, particularly brothers, is observed as a major issue underlying strained relationships. A gradual

shift from generalized reciprocity to balanced reciprocity is also noted among them.

Increasingly social scientists acknowledge the fact that the shape and character of family life undergo change or transformation to a large extent through social networks, specifically after traumatic life events like widowhood. The specificity of life events and the reciprocal effects of personal networks and life events are most evident in the area of social support (Cohen and McKay, 1984; Pearlin, 1985). The community within which widows reside - rural or urban, is important in determining the status and life of widows. Not all aspects of the society and culture are available as resources for the community. The type of family lineage, including mate selection, nature of marriage, parental roles, and the manner in which the marital unit is embedded in a larger kin network and in other social units influence widowhood and the support systems. The ways in which the widows cope with life event depends on changes within relationships and networks. Some relationships are likely to diminish or end completely while others may become more satisfying. Although individuals may differ in how much their network is affected by widowhood almost everyone experience some degree of change.

Recent investigations have established that social support promotes well-being, while interfering or rejecting networks as well as loss of networks are likely to create distress. Networks may be categorised into (a) effective - monitoring, maintaining and when necessary restoring the well-being of its members and their families (b) those which are ineffective in these functions for a variety of reasons and (c) those which can be shown to be actively destructive on the well-being of the individuals and their families. A varying pattern is also prevalent with the

duplication of potentially and antagonistic ties which are more common among close kin. If relationships tend to be exclusively conflictual it might be relatively easy for an individual to extricate oneself from such relationships. However relationships are more complex than that among kin in rural communities. If a relationship provides support as well as antagonism and proximate then exit from such relationships may be more difficult.

In earlier studies antagonism refers to those individuals who are demanding, disappointing and upsetting. On widowhood, society and individuals change their definitions on needs and resources. To meet these needs, support systems must remain flexible. Social and individual problems develop a person and his or her associates differ as to the support each needs and as to the best way of meeting these needs. Conflict between expectations and reality can be a problem in all social interactions, but it becomes more acute in situations where a person sees them critical enough to warrant special attention. This is often the case with persons recovering from a shattering experience, such as the loss of a significant other. Problems with support systems can also arise when changes in outlook or disorganising events in one's life make past supports and the way they are organised seem unsatisfactory or dysfunctional. Finally problems with support exchanges can arise if the person is seen by associates as somehow different or unable to participate 'normally' in conventional interaction. The social discrimination of widows in terms of stigma attached to widowhood, inheritance rights, privileges etc., are vulnerable areas of conflict for rural farming widows.

A few research questions are raised here to have a deeper understanding on conflict. Are there broader measures of conflict? Alternatively are they 'normal' aspects of interaction resulting in indifferent or neutral feelings? Earlier research findings have stressed the importance of finer distinctions of antagonistic relationships which may provide precise conclusions regarding the role of 'conflict' in social networks. Are antagonistic ties kin related? Affinal or consanguine? However due to the prevalence of kin relations in social networks, this remains an understudied yet a potential avenue for research.

Though information pertaining to supportive ties and its freight in various dimensions has been well documented in the literature, predominance of kin relations and the issue of conflict particularly with available obligatory kin- affinal and consanguineous kin in rural communities remains unexplored. The paper focuses on the patterns and processes of conflict prevailing among rural widows and their affinal and consanguineous kin. An attempt is also made to identify the nuances of such conflict processes.

The data utilised for the study is drawn from a larger study on 'Rural Widow's Social Support and Network'. The study was carried out between Jan - Dec 1996 in two rural blocks of western Tamil Nadu with multicrop farming. Respondents were spread in 48 revenue villages and by using purposive sampling technique 307 widows who were predominantly cultivators were identified. Information pertaining to widowhood, support and network were collected through personal interviews with the help of a schedule. Village Administrative Officials and Agricultural extension workers were the local informants in identifying the respondents.

Patterns of Kinship Association

The paper has examined the primary kinship networks of the widowed. Compared with affinal kin, consanguineous kin are involved to a greater extent of support exchanges to widows based largely on obligation. In general rural communities are still in the midst of traditional Kinship system where obligation are buttressed by specific rules on rights and obligations. Whereas the relationship with husband's kin are allowed to disintegrate and are often characterised by the potential for tension and conflict. Strained relationships are specific to certain subnetworks of the consanguineous kin. The type of problem experienced by widows with different categories are largely dependent on the areas in which they deal and where mutual exchanges takes place.

Property Disputes

Prior to widowhood the affinal kin occupied a primary position in the activities of the family which were anchored mainly by the husband. A majority of the problems with affines center

Table 1: Conflicting and passive ties of affinal and consanguineous kin

Affines					Consanguines				
Sub Network	Conflicting ties		Passive ties		Sub Network	Conflicting ties		Passive ties	
	No.	%	No.	%		No.	%	No.	%
Fil N=56	14	1.97	13	1.83	Fath N=94	4	0.36	17	1.54
Mil N=102	38	5.36	28	3.95	MoTh N=174	7	0.64	38	3.45
Bil N=276	87	12.27	73	10.30	Broth N=424	48	4.36	91	8.27
Husi N=275	86	12.13	146	20.59	Sist N=409	14	1.27	116	10.54
Total Ties Available = 709					Total Ties Available = 1101				
Fil	-	Father-in-law	Fath	-	Father				
Mil	-	Mother-in-law	MoTh	-	Mother				
Bil	-	Brother-in-law	Broth	-	Brother				
Husi	-	Husband's Sister	Sist	-	Sister				

around the partitioning of land and economic transactions usually arising out of gap in the perceived and received support. Frictions in legal division of land with in-laws persist in a few families even before widowhood. On widowhood the pending problems might get intensified for a few while some widows initiate steps to receive their due share only after widowhood. In course of such dealings widows end up straining their relationships with in-laws as a result of prolonged controversies regarding inheritance of property, receipt of poor share of land or on filing legal suit for want of share. Generally the widows who have problem with the in-laws feel that they try to 'suppress' and 'deceive' them 'unsympathetically'.

Widows expect their in-laws to be generous and fair in parting with the traditional property. In majority of cases the widows are not satisfied by the process and type of property received and they feel deprived. A few childless widows and widows without male issues have reported that they have been denied ownership to property. Repeated attempts at their level for amicable solutions usually fail and they are forced to seek other remedies. They usually represent it to their primary kith and kin in the initial stages. Negotiations and mediations are carried out through the first and second degree lineage/clan members. During disputes antagonistic groups have their respective primary groups as supportive members to express their strength and solidarity. When the problems seem acute, community

leaders and village heads cutting across villages are invited for settlement. While those who can afford or who have supportive persons to afford seek legal remedies. Long after the settlement of disputes the members of each group keep in mind the grudges and mutual exchanges between the groups become non-existent.

In cases where property disputes have been the cause of spouses death, the widows and her primary kin avoid any close relationship with affinal kin and the ties are viewed only as active negative ties. Consequently widows are not given any share, forced to leave the house or sell the property and denial of documents etc., and few claim that they have invested large amount in land and only on clearing the debts the land could be partitioned.

In such instances, the widow and her children may withdraw themselves totally from affinal kin and wait for the children to grow before they venture to claim the share again. While some settle down in the in-laws place either alone or along with the consanguineous kin though the in-laws continue to be a constant source of problem. Disputes persisting for long have enabled sufficient time for the in-laws to tamper with the records.

In a few cases the in-laws accused the widows as responsible for her husband's death and quote it as a reason to 'deceive' her of the property.

Widows who had been married to distant places and experienced short span of marital life

dispose of the land and migrate to natal place. In due course they lose contact with the affines.

At times problems are serious only between few members of the primary affinal kin. Problems are likely to arise between male siblings of the deceased and widows in sharing the subsistence amount paid to the elderly parents in law. Though the parents in law are not inclined to receive direct financial support from the widows, the male siblings in law insist on their contribution since they also form part of the share holdings. Similarly occasional consideration by parents-in-law to give extra or better share to widows is meted with serious opposition. Violation of such refusals may end up in conflict within them.

Problems in Sharing Common Resources and Co-operation for Joint Activities

Many affinal kin are residentially proximate and joint owners of common resources due to segmentation of traditional property. Conflicts over petty issues is almost a day to day phenomenon and joint ownership are a fertile ground to trigger such problems. Common areas of disputes involve demarcation of common boundaries, path, felling of trees in common border, grazing of livestock, maintaining common fences, lack of flexibility in sharing common resources etc.

In joint dealing occasions may arise in which widows enlist co-operation of conflicting ties such as getting a signature for loans or for disposing land. When situations are conducive strained ties become disruptive and possibility of receiving support from such ties are rare. Disputes over inherited debts are also common.

Demands and Interference

On widowhood many widows either wish to stay with consanguineous kin or as a subnuclear unit but some in-laws insist the widows to stay in joint families along with them. Generally after widowhood the widows are under the grip of undue fear that may be 'exploited' in terms of service and 'property'. Based on these widows refuse to comply with their wish which is likely to create strained relationships among the affines.

Instances are common where in-laws interfere and exercise authority in the day to day ac-

tivities of cultivation, rearing children and their life style. Certain relationships turn negative when they are not consulted for important decisions.

At times when demand for labour is high and essential strained in-laws stop the labour force and play a role in increasing their labour charges.

In circumstances where consanguineous kin stay with the widows for support, the affinal kin accuse them of surviving on the deceased persons resources. Often the widowhood status becomes handy for verbal abuse and utilize it to subdue the widows who often become emotionally sensitive to such situations. Direct problems with sister's in law are few but negative relationships with other members of affines influence the relationship between widows and their sister in law's. Instances are liberally quoted where the sister in law's are also part of those who spread rumours and unnecessary gossip.

Negative relationships with menfolk are focused on property and economic transactions while verbal abuse and issues over petty matters like evoking instances and larger utilisation of some products find a place in conflicts among women.

Occasional overlaps of support and antagonism are also evident. Though negative relationships prevail among the affines, security for young children and emergency support are frequently provided.

Though, the problems quoted in various dimensions are vital in influencing the well-being of widows, the source and nature of problems are not totally unique to the widows. The dimensions and potential problems come into open and persons take liberty in victimising the widows in the absence of a core supporter. In intact families, the problems would have been faced by the husband and direct involvement by women are generally low. In the absence of husband, widows expect their husband's kin to be 'considerate', 'empathetic' and provide a minimum level of services which could be performed by any 'unrelated' person. When they are perceived to fail even in providing minimum support expected of someone not related ties concerned in this circle become strong negative ties.

Table 2: Major areas of conflict with affines and consanguines

<i>Areas of conflict</i>	<i>Affines</i>		<i>Consanguines</i>	
	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>%</i>
Economic Dispute	139	61.78	24	32.88
Traditional Obligations	5	2.22	19	26.03
Reciprocity	4	1.78	15	20.55
Interpersonal Relationships	55	24.44	6	8.22
Negativity along with Anchorage Persons	22	9.78	9	12.33
Total	225		73	

Fit Between Perceived and Received Support from Consanguines

Consanguineous kin are tied to the respondent by the bond of obligation and relationships are governed by reciprocity. While affines are the most common problematic ties, consanguineous kin are the primary source of support, more appropriately claimed as obligatory ties. The presence or absence of consanguineous kin is itself a major factor associated with measures of well-being. It is the culture of the society and general expectation of the widows to consider the consanguineous kin as the primary source of support. The norm of obligation is fostered in agrarian communities due to short marriage distance and cross cousin marriages.

Problems with consanguineous kin revolve around situations in which they fail to fulfill obligatory functions. Frictions with available parents are generally infrequent but they arise in situations when they are 'inconsiderate' and refuse to function in certain core roles where they are expected to perform in the first category. Relationships were strained when parents refused to join their living arrangements nor took any initiative for providing alternative arrangements, particularly when they had young children, daughters even if not very young and when they reside in farm houses. In some families though the parents stay with the widows for sometime they constantly express their inclination to join the son which they feel prestigious in conformity with the cultural orientations. The relationships undergo changes with parents when they visit the widows infrequently or show less concern.

The usual conflicting relationships among consanguines are with their own brothers. Widows expect high level of support from the brothers and local cultural idioms like proverbs also reinforce the importance and rights and obligations of male siblings. In reality when contradicting activities are observed gap persists in perceived and received support.

The reduced visits by brothers following widowhood for fear of being burdened with responsibilities or support is a noted phenomenon for strained relationships, parents generally gift daughters on various occasions like marriage of their children, house warming ceremonies etc. and with their death or ageing the traditional obligations are passed on to the male sibs and widows also take liberty to seek such gifts from them. In such situations when the male siblings explicitly refuse cordial relationships become strained. With legal provisions for property rights to daughters, a serious reconsideration on traditional obligations has been set in motion by male siblings. When widows are not in a position to receive any support or gifts they resort to claiming a share in the parental property either alone or with other female siblings and such situations turn out to be a potential area for conflict.

Negative relationships are minimum among sisters since the relationships are not governed by the norm obligation. Extension of support operates more on a voluntaristic principle as among friends.

Norm of Reciprocity

Different types of reciprocity operate between parent-child dyad and sibling-sibling dyad. Generalised reciprocity or pure gift is the operating principle between parent-child dyad where by hospitality and aid are given without conscious consideration of an equal or time bound return. On the other hand, balanced reciprocity- a more or less direct and equitable form of reciprocity is operational between siblings. In this precise accounting, there is less tolerance of a one way flow of benefits, hence relationships are more easily disrupted if the flow becomes inequitable. If inequities arise, failure to reciprocate not only violates social expectation but also provides the rationale for dissolving the relationship. It could also be observed from the

findings that parents and siblings well fit into the respective principles of reciprocity. Failure to reciprocate and inequal reciprocity on the part of widows is a major area for loss of support and strained relationships.

In societies practicing cross-cousin alliances exchange of brides and bridegrooms between brothers and sisters is also a potential area for conflict. A few cases of strained relationships were cited when male siblings sought the widows children as marital partners for their children or for themselves. Refusal to oblige to such proposals often evoke criticism and strained not only among the male sibs but also among the parents. Cross cousin marriages are viewed as a long term support for the widows and are generally wished and mooted by the parents. Such disapprovals are followed by discontinued support and criticisms that widows should have some sense of gratitude.

Sometimes, the reverse is also true when widows seek alliance for her children from the brothers family. Acceptance of such proposals are only few while many express their refusal indirectly due to the lower status of the widows or due to availability of better suitors for their children from outside as result of which the widows feel offended and harmonious relationships may become strained.

Expectations of economic support and services or calculativeness by the male sib also hinder the cordial relationships. Provision of unconditional support by siblings is only a myth.

Problems in Transactions

Widows generally trust primary kin, particularly brothers for routine transactions due to the approachability without cultural prescriptions and proscriptions and act as potential supporter in place of the husband. Many widows entrust the total management and vital issues to their brothers. Sometimes the male siblings utilise this opportunity and spend the money extravagantly and draw the widow into debts and misuse the trust. Breach of trust by primary obligatory ties become a trivial issue emotionally and materially.

Problems in Interpersonal Relationship

With changes in living arrangement to

consanguines place many widows express that they are treated with lower dignity and they lack freedom to be on their own in certain issues and few regret for resorting to such an option. They are expected to comply with their directions and some widows state that their resources and services are 'exploited' and such a situation has led to the suicide of a widow.

Spouses of supportive members also play a vital role in the smooth conduct and maintenance of relationships. Nature of treatment by the brothers wife and the indirect expression of not wishing the widows presence along with them and adjustment problems pose a serious threat to the cordial relationships among the family members which ultimately lead to other structural changes in the family. Widows generally avoid discussing such problems with their primary kin members for fear of creating problems within their family.

Other causes though less common, some express that almost every widow have atleast one consanguine kin as a core supporter and if such supportive ties have negative ties, the widow also turn to be negative towards the group as mark of closeness towards their supportive members.

CONCLUSION

There are stereotypic ideas in the role of both consanguines and affines in general and with respect to support to widows. In reality while the consanguines tend to be major providers of positive support, it is the affines who are the major sources of conflict and social strain. Conflict with affines usually revolve around economic issues in the process of sharing common resources or emanate from close proximity. On the other hand, dissonance in interpreting the traditional obligations of consanguines is a principle source of disruption of these ties. The type and degree of conflict experienced by rural farming widows due to gap in perceived and received support, transformations occurring in traditional obligation and reciprocity, problems in interpersonal relationships, etc. extend far beyond those reported in literature. Though the conflict assume a normal aspect in interaction, the widows are under constant stress which ultimately affect their social well-being. Conflicting situations

play a vital role in altering the composition, structure and content of network because of close relationship provided by some ties and joining of one clique in order to ensure continuous support. While social interaction may promote well-being, a feeling of well-being in itself is likely to increase one's capacity for social interaction and adaptation to widowhood. More empirical queries are required in this area. Which group of widows are closely linked to conflicting network? What are the survival strategies adopted to cope with conflict? To what extent does conflict influence the quantity and quality of support from network members?

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