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THE TRIBULATIONS OF ASIAN WIDOWS: INDIA AND INDONESIA COMPARED

By Professor Saskia E. Wieringa

In many societies, older women are thought of as a marginalized group; they face various forms of exclusion, compounded by intersecting factors of religion and socioeconomic class. Studies have shown that the twin characteristics of old age and poverty bear a stronger correlation with economic vulnerability among poor women compared with poor men. But the experiences of any one group of women should never be homogenized. Ethnographic evidence from some societies has shown that older women face different experiences from younger women owing to cultural constructions around widowhood.

in both countries: heterosexual marriage is seen to be the norm and, therefore, the 'normal' state and respectable situation for women. The married life is in fact considered the only dignified way to search for intimacy and happiness. In both cultures, the honour of a woman is suspect if she is yet to be married or is no longer married. She faces discrimination from religious officials, is harassed by colleagues and neighbours, and is scorned by the media—forms of marginalization that may be deemed as symbolic violence.

Research has given us sobering insight into what is upheld to be the 'normal' marriage in the two contexts. In India, for example, marriage is considered a sacred bond, a step forward in one's spiritual growth, which is one of the reasons divorce is frowned upon and the death of the husband is seen as the moral failure of a wife. Even though in India the traditional pattern of marriage with its caste endogamy and patrilocality is changing, dowry, domestic violence and lack of communication between spouses are not uncommon. By contrast in Indonesia, while marriage is also invested with sanctity, its eternal character is less emphasized. While the national marriage law takes precedence

over religious and ethnic diversity, the non-registered, so-called Islamic marriage continues to take place although at present there is a move toward banning such unions. Furthermore, polygamy is allowed under certain circumstances in Indonesia. Vested with male sexual, economic and fundamentalist Islamic pride, the circumstances of a man taking a second, although unofficial wife, has been surrounded with much

This article details the marginalization of widows in two Asian contexts—India and Indonesia. Life histories were conducted among thirty-five older women residing in Delhi, India and Jakarta, Indonesia with the intention of analysing the workings of heteronormativity (the assumption that everyone leads 'normal' married lives) among women whose married lives have ended. In Indonesia, the sample included both widowed and divorced women; in India, only widowed women were interviewed since the divorce figures are much lower than in Indonesia.

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Contrary to belief, the association of inauspiciousness with widows is strong

FEATURE ARTICLE



Saskia E. Wieringa

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Among her recent books are *Sexual Politics in Indonesia* (2002, MacMillan), *Tommy Boys, Lesbian Men and Ancestral Wives* (2005 with Ruth Morgan, Jacana), and *Women's Sexualities and Masculinities in Asia* (2007 co-edited with Evie Blackwood, Palgrave).

deceit and, therefore, controversy.

In India, Hindu widows are labelled unfortunate and inauspicious. Oftentimes they are blamed for the death of their husbands. Widows are not allowed to wear colourful clothes. They tend to live their lives frugally and devote themselves to the memory of their deceased husbands, staying in their parents-in-laws' house, where they are treated with contempt. The women interviewed differed greatly in how they responded to their tribulations. Among middle-class women, if they find an opportunity to engage in teaching, they are happy to have found some wage work through which they are able to earn respect. Poor women, on the other hand, mainly find work as domestic servants, a job which brings them neither pride nor economic security. Nonetheless they too are expected to live within strict moral boundaries of modesty and silence. For women of both classes, remarriage is out of the question. If they find love again, they are forced to live "double lives".

The Indonesian women who were interviewed, although suffering from similar economic marginalization, tended to experience less moral and social stigma. The taboo on remarriage does not apply to them and they tend to experience fewer guilt-ridden and self-denying attitudes compared with Hindu widows. Interestingly in Indonesia, the word 'janda' is used for both a widow and a divorced woman alike. The connotation here is that the woman has experienced married life but is presently without a male partner and, hence, is available through remarriage.

But Indonesian widows have been found to experience stigma in other ways. A

In their quest to battle marginalization in society, ironically both Indian and Indonesian widows have found themselves waging an arduous struggle to gain dignity, respectability and love—characteristics traditionally reserved for 'normal' married people—although they fall outside the bonds of normativity.

major form of exclusion Indonesian widows face is that of being ignored by one's religious community. They are ignored, for instance, when meat is handed out

during Eid Adha, when destitute people, including widows are entitled to a share. Several women related that they were considered 'bad' women even though they took great care to live morally impeccable lives. For example, they took great care not to be seen with men by only receiving male guests in the front yards of their homes and on work-related trips, they would not reveal their room numbers to male colleagues. In these cases, they internalized their experiences of exclusion and constantly reiterated that they had lost their self-esteem.

Widows are also dealt differently from their younger sisters by the media in both India and Indonesia. Widows are silenced by their invisibility. Beauty columns and accounts of violence such as rape focused mainly on younger women, if not minors. In Indonesia, the public discourse on sexuality, including non-normative practices and identities, was much more open than in India. However, the media revealed a similarly strong heteronormative bias by emphasizing rape, molestation and sexual harassment. As in India, there is great emphasis on clothes, beauty and other embodied aspects of women's lives.

Generally, the women interviewed felt discriminated by their community; they experienced the public arena as a contested, dangerous terrain. The media, religion and the State have been found to collude in promoting a version of the 'happy' Indian or Indonesian family from which widows are excluded and for which they are doubly punished: not only do they mourn the death of a loved one (if the marriage was good), or the absence of a provider for their children (if their husbands took their role as head of

the household seriously), but they also have to face the discouragement and suspicion of members of their own societies.

Widowed women, however, employed various means to cope with their situation. Searching for economic stability was a prime concern for all the women interviewed. This may in itself entail a form of rebellion, for in a society where women are supposed to be

dependent on men for their economic survival, economically independent women defy that norm. Yet it has not been easy for them; the gendered wage

gap and patriarchal structures controlling women's labour form great stumbling blocks.

Finding intimacy and love in a situation when one is supposed to be loyal to a deceased person's memory is another formidable obstacle they face in their search for fulfilment. In India, widows are strictly controlled, particularly among Hindus. In Indonesia, in contrast, many men prey upon widows, hoping to take them on as unofficial second wives. In many cases, this does not entail any social or even economic stability, and often

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the consent of the first wife is not sought, although this is legally permitted. Consequently, an atmosphere of deceit and marriage betrayal surrounds widows. Thus among widows, it is difficult to find a stable new partner.

Since the suspicion with which widows are treated, both in India and in Indonesia, makes it difficult for them to gain respect, a major strategy widows employ to gain a sense of pride and self-worth in their families and within the wider community is by glorifying motherhood. Particularly middle-class widows use this strategy to reclaim their lost dignity. Even in cases where their prior marriage had not been happy, many have been found to steer their children towards the same system that caused them pain and which failed them.

In their quest to battle marginalization in society, ironically both Indian and Indonesian widows have found themselves waging an arduous struggle to gain dignity, respectability and love—characteristics traditionally reserved for 'normal' married people—although they fall outside the bonds of normativity. Because the discourse on happiness is strongly bound up with the married life, in spite of deceit and violence being condoned in marriage, widows in India and Indonesia have little choice but to uphold these characteristics in order to find a place in society.
