Surviving Spouses: Support for Widows in Malang, East Java
Marianti, R.

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1. Introduction

Widowhood is a phenomenon with a paradoxical nature. The phenomenon is both universal as well as specific or context bound. It is universal because every married person risks confronting and experiencing widowhood, but it is specific because the way widowhood will be experienced depends on the time and place where the widowed person lives. Therefore, an examination of the way widowhood is perceived and experienced, first of all, should be contextual. Nevertheless, we can also find some connections in the studies on widows and widowhood in different contexts, for example on the (popular) images of widows. Interestingly, in different societies, these images are similarly ambiguous. By losing their spouses, widows can be perceived either as helpless or more empowered since they are free from wifely subordination. Concerning their sexuality, widows are seen either as the bearers of long life devotion and faithfulness to their deceased husband or as the potential disturbers of moral order, since their sexuality is no longer under male control.

However, even within a particular context, widowhood is a relative phenomenon. This can be explained in two ways. Firstly, because widowhood is inseparable from many facets of social relationships such as kinship, neighbourly relationship, gender relationship, inter-generational relationships etc. Widows engage in these relationships though in some contexts they are excluded from social life because of their widowhood. Therefore, these aspects should be taken into account in an examination of widows and widowhood. Secondly, because widowhood is one of the categories that belong to the larger phenomenon of the spouse-less state. Divorcees and spinsters for example, are comparable with widows in the sense that all of them are in a spouse-less situation. The causes of their spouseless ness, and therefore the consequences of it, are, however, different. A comparison between widows and other spouse-less categories can illuminate the specificity of widowhood and widows.

Concerning the issues I mentioned above, this chapter is firstly aimed at highlighting various aspects of widowhood before they are analysed in relation to the issue of support. With this goal in mind, the chapter will discuss some popular images of widows and the extent to which these images affect the widows’ lives in urban Java. The differences between
widows and other spouse-less categories will also be examined. The second aim of this chapter is to provide a general description of the widows who make up the research population. This description is important for assessing their position within the wide range of widows' life condition in urban Java.

2. Images of the Widow

*What is a widow?*

The opening sentence of Buitelaar's (1995) paper on the representation and the social realities of widows is a seemingly simple question: ‘what is a widow?’ But the answer to this question is not a simple one, since it has to deal with various facets of widowhood. The answer will inevitably also reflect the way widows and widowhood are perceived in the given socio-cultural and historical context.

In her book on Spanish widows, Os (1997:12) noted that she entered the field guided by two extreme images namely, the sad but faithful widows and the merry widows. However, one of the important conclusions of her study is that, in reality, the images of widows 'have many colours'. There were differences of presentations among widows according to age, rural - urban context, and social class. Thus, these images could not easily be reduced to either of two extreme images. But what are these images?

It is a general fact that widowhood starts with the death of one's spouse. According to Buitelaar (1995:1), ' [...] historically and cross-culturally speaking, it would be more correct to say that the death of her spouse is only prerequisite for woman to be called a 'widow'. Losing her spouse leads a woman into a specific social position that in some contexts is heavily burdened with culturally constructed identities. In the context where being a wife is the most important status that may be achieved by a woman, widows are expected to demonstrate their appreciation to this status by keeping their devotion to the deceased husband. Therefore, widows have to undergo many restrictions. They should resign from the social life and should not make themselves attractive for new relationships with men. The widows' lives are expected to be filled with mourning for the losses namely, their husbands, and therefore, their status as a wife. The Hindu ideal of *Sati* is an example of how widows should perform the role model for other women. Widows have to prove their chastity and faithfulness to their deceased husband by exerting an ascetic's way of life or even burning herself in their husbands' funeral pyre.
The death of a husband means an absence of individual, direct and legitimate male control on the widow. This situation can invoke a fear of an uncontrolled female sexuality (Buitelaar, 1995:5). Moreover, as a sexually experienced woman, the widow is also easily seen as having an unfulfilled sexual desire. Thus, she can disturb the sexual order by seducing men for her pleasure. Here begins the image of the merry widow that also results in restrictions for widows. Buitelaar (1995:8) noted, ‘Where marriage is the exclusive domain for sexual relations and for male control over female sexuality, virgins and widows are anomalies par excellence. Their sexuality is a particular focus of symbolic attention, and chastity becomes the dominant, if not the overruling (prescriptive) trait of their female identity’.

Being released from male control and supervision, widows are sometimes seen as inheriting the masculine power of the deceased husbands. The cases where widows take over the leadership of both the family as well as the business and then become rivals of the male members of the family are not uncommon. Moreover, widowhood can bring the freedom which women did not possess as wives. Consequently, widows are also regarded as more empowered than many 'ordinary' women. According to Buitelaar (1995:10), ‘[...] having looked death in the eye, widows are situated on the indefinite threshold between life and death [...] widows are liminars par excellence. They are often associated with the power, awe or dread of the already dead’.

In contrast with the image as the 'more empowered women', some studies (Dreze, 1990; Jansen, 1987) show pictures of widows as socially underprivileged. This image is reflected by the comparison between widows and orphans (Hanawalt, 1996 and Bakari, 1988). This comparison especially presumes that widows have a dependent and vulnerable economic position (Buitelaar, 1995:5; Sullivan, 1994:119; Gardiner, 1991).

In some Javanese folk tales, the contrasting images of widows can also be found. One of the tales is about an old and childless widow. She was very poor, but because of her honesty, God gave her fortune and happiness by sending her pieces of gold that fell from the roofs. The other tale is about the selfish widow mbok Rondo Dadapan in the story of bawang merah-bawang putih (the onion and the garlic). This selfish widowed stepmother was punished by God because of her greed. Those two opposed images illustrating the contrast: widows may be old, poor, helpless but honest and should be protected or young, rich, greedy therefore should be controlled or punished.

But what about the widows in the urban Javanese neighbourhoods? To what extent do these images affect their lives? To answer these questions, I shall relate the images of widows
in Javanese urban neighbourhoods such as in the Semeru and Kacangan to two factors namely, the influences of Islam and the domination of alternative images and roles.

**The influence of Islam**

Since the majority of widows (and other inhabitants of the alleys) are Moslems, the influences of Islam in their lives are obvious. Therefore, in this section, I will pay attention to the Quranic references to widows.

Regardless of the unfinished debate about the influences of Islam on women's socio-political position, this religion has formulated important rules for widowed women and orphans such as rules about inheritance and maintenance rights. Under this religion, the inheritance right of widows and orphan girls is protected. Besides this right, there is also prohibition on considering women (in most cases these are widows) as inheritable property. Although this prohibition is not relevant in Java, in general, Islam gives widows the opportunity to be respected for their decision concerning a remarriage.

In Semeru alley, I met a widow who had been remarried with her deceased husband's younger brother. According to her, this decision was made because she had very young children and she could not raise them alone. However, according to the neighbourly gossip she already had an affair with the brother in-law even before her husband died. Since Islam does not prevent widows from remarrying, a remarried widow is socially accepted. But in this case, the practice of levirate (and not the remarriage) is the object of neighbourly suspicions and gossip.

Another Quranic verse provides protection for widows through the rights on familial support. Thus, a widow who cannot support herself has rights to be maintained by her father or closest male kin (Jansen, 1995:212-214). However, there is always a problem of gap between rules and their implementation.

According to Islam, widows have an obligatory waiting period before they can remarry. The waiting period is four months and ten days, and in case of pregnancy, widows have to wait for forty days after the childbirth. In the contemporary urban Java context, this waiting period is still practised. This waiting period is the only norm that can be seen as a kind of mourning custom to be practised by widows in urban Java. However, it does not impose an isolated social life on widows. Within this period widows can perform their daily activities, maintain their social contacts as they did before the widowhood and do not wear special clothes or dark colours. It can be said that the period does not contribute to the construction of
a distinct identity as widows. Moreover, it appears to be specifically instituted for clarification of a descendant's biological father.

*The alternative images and identities*

The images and identity of widow can be less predominant because they are challenged by other images and identities. The ideal of *ibu* (mother), for instance, is an important image and identity for many women in Indonesia including widows in Java. In the alleys, most of the widows are addressed by *ibu* or *bu*. This term can refer to both 'mother' as well as 'mrs'. The death of her husband does not change the way people address a widow as 'Mrs. X'. Consequently, even in her widowhood, this woman does not lose her identity as 'the wife of ...' In many women's organizations widows are commonly not differentiated from other non-widow members and still individually addressed as 'mrs. X (the name of their deceased husbands)'. It is worthy to note that the custom to address a wife (or a widow) with her husband's name is quite an urban phenomenon. In the rural areas, a woman or a man who has become a parent is usually called as 'the mother/father of Y (the first child's name)'. However, the ideal of mother is important both in urban as well as in rural area.

Besides this wifely image, the term of *ibu* also invokes the image of 'mother' in its broadest sense (since childless women also addressed by the same term). This motherly image, identity and even active role are conforming to the *ibu* ideology (*ibu-isme*) that is strongly imposed by the post 1965 government (Murray, 1991:1; Leeuwen, 1997:33).

*Mbah* or grandmother is the form of address for many old widows, especially those from the lower economic stratum. They become grandmothers for almost every younger family member or neighbour. This suggests that the identity of elderly is actually and explicitly stronger than the identity of widow.

In brief, in (urban) Java, the absence of strong mourning customs for widows and the presence of predominant alternative images and identities (as a wife, a mother and an elderly person) suppress the construction of a clear cut widow identity.

3. The Variation of Spouse-less Categories

Initially, I simply translated 'widow' with the Indonesian word *janda*. But, soon it was obvious that the translation was not correct. Each time I asked about *janda* in their neighbourhood, people gave me the names of widows, divorcees, deserted and never married women. According to the general Indonesian dictionary (*Kamus Umum Bahasa Indonesia, 1987*),

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*janda* is a person (either female or male) who lost her/his spouse because of death or divorce. Thus, this term does not specify either the gender aspect or the cause of the loss. But in the day-to-day practice, the term *janda* is only related to women and it actually means spouse-less (adult) women in general. The term *duda* is the masculine match of it.

The exact translation of 'widow' is *janda mati* \(^1\). A divorced woman is categorized as *janda cerai* \(^2\), a spinster or never-married woman is categorized as *perawan tua* \(^3\) and a deserted woman is often vaguely called *janda*. Sometimes a deserted woman is also described as *disia-siakan suaminya* or abandoned by her husband. The question is, then, what are the differences between widows and other categories of spouse-less women? To answer this question let us first look at some demographic facts as shown by the table below.

Table 3.1: Percentage of female population above 10 years, according to the marital status in Municipality of Malang, Regency of Malang and East Java (1995)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Single</th>
<th>Married</th>
<th>Divorced</th>
<th>Widowed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Municipality of Malang (urban Malang) N= 335,597</td>
<td>42.8</td>
<td>44.6</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>10.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The regency of Malang (rural Malang) N= 933,438</td>
<td>24.2</td>
<td>60.6</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The East Java Province N= 14,213,294</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>57.4</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>12.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: SUSENAS 1995

It is interesting to note that deserted women are usually not well represented in official statistical figures. Depending on the length of the abandonment and the way they perceived the abandonment, the unclear marital status of these women can be put both under category

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\(^1\) 'mati' means 'dead'.

\(^2\) 'cerai' means 'divorce'

\(^3\) 'perawan' means 'virgin' and 'tua' means 'old'.

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'married' as well as 'divorced'. Women who are abandoned by their husbands for a long period usually call themselves divorcees.

Table 3.1 also demonstrates that the percentage of widows is four times higher that of divorced women. A similar situation is also found in the alleys. Compared to the larger rural areas that also have a larger population, the higher percentage of single females in urban area of Malang is not unusual. The higher percentage of single females can also be found in other big city like Surabaya (38.51%). In these cities (and Javanese urban areas in general) young people are more likely to continue their education to a higher level, and therefore, they also remain single for a longer period.

The divorced women

Historical facts show that in nineteenth-century Java a divorce was easily obtained and frequently resorted too (Boomgaard, 1989:146). This situation is also indicated by Geertz's (1961:71) study within the twentieth-century context.

Both Boomgaard (1989) as well as Geertz (1961) illuminated some reasons for divorce such as, the early age of marriage, conflict between affinal relatives, economic irresponsibility or sexual infidelity. A study of marriage dissolution among Javanese Moslems in Jogyakarta (1964 - 1971) shows that more than 50% of the divorces were caused by the negligence of (marriage) obligations and wives' rejection on husbands' desire to have a new wife (Nakamura, 1990:73).

According to Boomgaard (1989:146), the divorce rate in nineteenth-century Java not only varied between regions and periods, but also between classes and occupational groups. He also mentioned that the (slight) historical evidence might point to a connection between high divorce rates and lack of possessions (Boomgaard, 1989:147).

Although it cannot be used as a clear-cut guidance to examine the complexity of divorce matter in Java, Geertz's (1961:137) differentiation of Javanese attitudes toward divorce according to various religious orientation is interesting. According to H. Geertz (1961:137-138), ‘[...] Javanese attitudes toward divorce seem to be associated with the various religious orientations present in Javanese culture [...] The numerically largest group, those peasants and lower class town dwellers who emphasize the animistic elements in Javanese religion, and who tend to a sort of individualistic ethic, the abangan, see divorce entirely situationally - as neither good or bad in itself, and regard it as a better solution to a conflict than the ever-present danger of sickness which is seen as a consequence of internal turmoil.[...] Another group, the santris, which includes peasants and lower- and middle-class town dwellers who
emphasize orthodox Islamic teachings, consider divorce morally wrong. [...] A third group, the prijaji townsmen, especially those in the governmental bureaucracy, who see themselves as members of an aristocracy and emphasize the Hindu-Buddhist aspects of Javanese religion, have a considerably lower divorce rate than the other groups. [...] Prijajis do not disapprove of divorce as such, but they deplore any action which reveals a person's inner self as lacking in refinement and control. [...] For a prijaji, then, it is a matter of shame and withdrawal of social esteem to be divorced, and as a result divorces among prijajis are rare.'

This differentiation provides an alternative way to understand variation of divorce rate and perceptions of divorce in Javanese society. The problem is: to what extend the three differently religious oriented groups (abangan - santri - prijaji) can be found and differentiated in the society that is studied. Especially because such religious orientations are neither mutually exclusive nor static. In order to gain a better understanding of these issues, I conducted in-depth interviews with some divorced women. The case of Elie (58) and Mutia (20) in Kemirahan alley will give an illustration of women in the divorced state.

When she was only sixteen, Elie married with a much older man from Sulawesi Island. They lived in a lower class neighbourhood in Surabaya, East Java. Her (ex) husband's relatives often came from Sulawesi and stayed at their house for months. When those relatives decided to find a second wife from their village for her husband, Elie broke up her marriage. At the time she got her divorce, she was 23 year old and had three very young children. After the divorce, Elie moved back to her parents' home, and lived there with her parents and younger sister. She only received financial support from her ex-husband during the first months after the divorce. Elie's parents did not have a good income. In order to get an additional income, Elie made and sold children's clothes.

Since Elie and her sisters were quite attractive, they did not have any difficulty in finding marriage candidates. A few of these men were wealthy married men. They regularly gave the sisters various kinds of gifts or money. These extra incomes allowed the women to handle the daily financial problems in a better way. Once, the head of the neighbourhood asked Elie and Lenie about their male guests. The women considered this question as an insult and were very angry: "We had to react that way, if we did not want to be controlled by our neighbours for every move we made".

Three years after her divorce, Elie got married again. In this marriage she became the second wife of a married man who owned a well-run business. This man rented a house for Elie at the outskirts of the city and visited her regularly. According to Elie, she did this purposely for her children's and her own better future although this also meant that she had to
accept all of the unpleasant consequences as a second wife. She never tried to find work because she was pessimistic about her low education. However, she was (and still is) proud that she kept all of her children with her although it was very hard to raise them in her divorced state. Although it is not without problems, Elie is still married and living with her second husband. In 1996, Elie hired a girl as housemaid who came from a small village in the Southern part of Malang. Her name is Mutia. After several months of work, Mutia decided to stop working for Elie and to get married with a young man who works in a bread factory in Malang. Elie was very disappointed because she thought that Mutia was too young for taking such a serious step.

During her marriage, Mutia lived in her husband's village and worked as an agricultural labourer. After nine months of marriage, Mutia asked a divorce because her husband had a new girl friend. Her husband did not refuse her request, and therefore, he paid all expenses of the divorce procedure. It was more than Rp 1,000,000. With her new status as a divorced woman, Mutia returned to her own village. But soon she decided to go back to Malang and work as a housemaid. In April 1998, she visited her former employer, Elie, who was glad to receive her again. Many times Elie said to Mutia that it was a silly decision to get married at such a young age. Elie also told Mutia to save her salary in a bank and not to eagerly plan the second marriage. This time, Mutia has taken her employer's advice. For Mutia, as a young divorced woman without children, the effort to re-build her life is less difficult.

These two women got divorced at young age and in both cases, the presence of another woman was the main reason for divorce. In their divorced state, the women's survival is influenced by their capability to generate income, the extent they have to take care of young children and the availability of support from various sources. In both cases, the ex-husbands did not provide (sufficient) alimony for the ex-wives and the children and there was no valuable marriage property to be divided up.

If we go back to H. Geertz's (1961:137) differentiation of attitudes toward divorce, both Elie as well as Mutia can be considered as more or less conforming to the picture of the abangan. According to them the divorce was not something to be proud of, but it was better than to live in endless conflicts. Thus, their decision to divorce was not easily considered as trespassing the morality norm. However, Elie has subsequently faced a morality problem raised by her second husband. He is a Javanese man who very proud of his priyayi background although he knows that it become less significant nowadays. When he and Elie moved from Surabaya to Malang, he insisted to keep Elie's 'divorce history' as a secret for their children (from the second marriage) and their new neighbours.
Many of the old widows in this study have a divorce history. They told me about their first, second, third even fourth marriages without the expression of disgrace. People tended to talk more about the reason for a divorce (the conflict) than about the social position of a divorcee within the neighbourhood. I met a divorced woman who is a PKK activist in the Kemirahan alley. Several times after a meeting, other PKK activists were gossiping her. But main topic of the gossip was the divorced woman's personal character (she was regarded as too demanding and dominant) and not her divorced state. In other words, in the alleys' social life, divorced women are not objects of neighbourly moral scrutiny because of her divorced state as such. Their morality will be scrutinized more seriously if they are considered as having improper relations with men. However, this kind of neighbourly control can also be experienced by widows, unmarried girls, or even married women, since the emphasis is put on the proper relationship between the two sexes.

*The deserted women*

From the legal point of view, deserted women are usually confronted with problems caused by their unclear marital status. This uncertain condition (neither married nor divorced) can severely reduce their right to claim inheritance, widow’s pension, alimony, divorce and even to remarry, especially if they cannot finance the legal procedures.

In Semeru alley, I carried out in-depth interviews with a few deserted women: Tiyem (60) and Rina (33). According to the neighbourhood head, Tiyem was one of the *janda* in his neighbourhood. Later I knew that she was a *janda cerai* (divorcee) but she was not a *janda mati* widow. Tiyem lived with her widowed mother in a tiny wooden house in the local market of Semeru alley. They came from a village near Tulungagung, 80 km west of Malang. Tiyem was married to a low-ranking government employee, until her husband had an affair with a younger woman and left Tiyem and their children. Tiyem and his husband never had a divorce, but they did not see each other again. "Biar saja (I don't care about it), he is a man without any responsibility for his family. He never gives his children money although he has a pension. I do not think too much about him, *nanti hanya bikin susah saja* (it only makes me sad) I also don't know whether I still have the right to a widow pension or not".

Rina was one of my housemates in a lodging house in Semeru alley. She came from a village at the edge of the municipality of Malang. Although Rina is almost thirty years younger than Tiyem, her life experience has many similarities with Tiyem's. She was also deserted by her husband and has to continue her life in an unclear marital status since her
husband left her for another woman a few years ago. From this marriage, she got a daughter. When she decided to look for a job in Malang, her mother looked after her little daughter.

At the time we met, Rina was working as the 'door-to-door' sales representative of a cosmetic product. Rina met and had a love affair with a young single man. "I asked him many times about our future plans, but he did not dare to tell his parents about our relationship. He thought that his parents would refuse me as their son's wife because I had already married before. I really want to marry him, but you know... I realise my position as a woman who is deserted by her husband. Besides, the divorce process is still going on. I have no idea when it will be completely done".

Neighbourly suspicions about deserted women's sexuality are similar to what other spouse-less women are confronted with. These suspicions and scrutiny are mainly related to various factors such as the women's age, work, appearance, and social relationships both inside as well as outside the neighbourhood. Apparently, their ability to get involved with men is evaluated through these factors. As Rina said, "I have to take care of my daughter, she is five years old now! I already tried many kinds of job. What could I do? I had to take every opportunity to get a job with a better salary. Before I got the position as a cosmetics sales lady, I worked as a score-girl in a billiard club. At that period I had to come home very late every night. I usually took off my shoes, and walked on my tiptoe. I felt sungkan (uneasy) for the neighbours". Her feeling that the neighbours will keep an eye on her can be perfectly understood. 'Night jobs' in such clubs are not considered as a proper livelihood for 'respectable' young women. But, as Rina said, she only had very little choice.

Rina's experience is parallel with the experience of Idah (45), a good-looking widow in the same alley. She works as a tailor in her sister-in-law's home industry. Since they have a close relationship, her sister in law often asked Idah to accompany her for shopping. As the consequence, Idah often came home after 9 p.m. Some of her neighbours (one of them an old widow) were gossiping about her for having another improper job.

**Spinsters**

I agree with Boomgaard (1989:142) that spinster- and bachelorhood have never been popular in Java. There have never been any customs or institutions that forbade marriage, or beliefs that made lifelong chastity a desirable way of life. Around 1900 it was said that the Javanese regarded bachelorhood after a certain age as improper or even unnatural.

In her study, H. Geertz (1961: 70) has demonstrated that Javanese parents eagerly arrange a (first) marriage for their daughters to remove the stigma of spinsterhood from their
daughters and relieving themselves from embarrassment. The status of divorcee is actually more acceptable than that of spinster. 'Whatever the cause [of spinsterhood], some parents feel that the best solution in such situation is to find a man who will agree to enter into a temporary marriage with the girl, the understanding being that after a week or so he will divorce her. Once the girl is a divorcée, she can easily get a husband, for a man who would have hesitated to ask her before, when it would have involved an elaborate first wedding, will not be so afraid now; and she herself will, through her initiation into marriage, have lost her timidity and be eagerly to marry again.' (Geertz, 1961:70)

I doubt whether the temporary marriage is still widely practised in urban Java nowadays. Such an arranged marriage is obviously unpopular with many of the younger generation especially among those with a higher education. Parents may encourage marriage by introducing their children to supposedly proper candidates or even reject the children's choice, but parents who force their children to get married are not a common phenomenon any longer. In spite of this changing attitude toward an arranged marriage, spinsterhood is still a sensitive matter, a source of anxiety, and should be avoided.

I met Lipah (65) in Kacangan alley. She is a Madurese woman who used to work as a coconut seller in the main market of Malang. According to her, she is not married because no man wanted to take an unattractive woman like her as a wife. However, Lipah has always taken care of her nephews. "They are my sons, I have raised them, taught them manners and paid for their school fees. You see, I am still busy with them. Sometimes, I also take care of their small children and regard them as my own grandchildren". Although she lives alone now, her nephews regularly visit her.

For the neighbourhood head, Lipah is one of the janda. He even didn't know that Lipah was never married. Through direct observations, I couldn't differentiate Lipah from the widows in the alley. Her withdrawal from communal activities such as the pengajian (Koran reading) was mainly based on lack of interest. Within the neighbourly interactions, Lipah did not suffer from any social isolation.

In Semeru alley, I interviewed Rohma (36); an unmarried woman who lives with her widowed mother. In contrast with Lipah, Rohma talked about her spinsterhood reluctantly. She only asked who would take care of her parents if she got married. Helped by one of her widowed sisters, Rohma runs a small shop that is attached to her parental house. Although Rohma regularly attends the neighbourly pengajian, her social life is mostly connected with her extended family. During my stay in the alley, I hardly ever heard neighbourly gossip
about Rohma. The only comment on her was given by one of her sister, "Rohma has always been a difficult person, but she takes care of our parents very well".

To sum up, the differences between widows, divorced or deserted women and spinsters can be highlighted by several interrelated aspects. First, the emotional and social aspects. These aspects are connected with the dissimilar perceptions about widowhood, spinsterhood, divorced and deserted state. In a context where being married is one of the most important statuses that can be achieved, a widow can be regarded as a person who has lost status. This loss is inevitable, and therefore, widowhood may lead to compassion. Conversely, a spinster is a person who has failed to achieve the desired status, hence spinsterhood may cause embarrassment. A divorced or deserted woman has both lost as well as failed to maintain the status as a married person. However since a case of divorce or desertion may be caused by various problems, it can be perceived as either bad or necessary.

Secondly, the legal aspect that is connected with differences in the women's rights to inheritance, alimony, support and pension. Since these rights overlap greatly with important sources of income, this legal aspect is also inseparable from the economic aspect. For example, a widow is entitled to the inheritance both from her husband and from her parents. In some situations, a widow is also entitled to a widow’s pension. A divorced woman is entitled to a part of marriage property and alimony, but not to a pension. A spinster is only entitled to the inheritance from parents.

However, the illustration shows that economic condition is too complicated to be reduced to these rights alone. Widows, divorcees and spinsters can fall into a similar economic problem just because there is nothing to be inherited from the deceased parents or husband, and there is no sufficient marriage property to be divided.

4. Gender Roles and Widowhood

Widowhood does not exclusively happen to one sex, an examination of it should also devote attention to the prescribed behaviour related to each sex. Regarding the context, people learn the appropriate manners of conduct as male or female. They exercise roles - a set of behaviour, attitudes and motivations - that are socially developed. These roles involve encouraged differences between the two sexes (Davidson, 1979:2).

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4 In the lower level of Javanese language, a spinster is also described as 'ora/ndak payu' or 'can't be sold'.
Gender ideals impose specific limitations and provide specific opportunities on each sex. They influence how life-stages, including the period after losing a spouse, are experienced by a man or a woman. In this part, I shall examine of how some problems of widowhood are influenced by gender ideals and roles within the Javanese context.

_Widowhood among women and men_

One of the differences among widowers and widows can be demonstrated through demographic data.

Table 3.2: The Percentage of widows within the female population and widowers within the male population 10 years of age and over in Indonesia and East Java 1996.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Indonesia Widows</th>
<th>Indonesia Widowers</th>
<th>East Java Widows</th>
<th>East Java Widowers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In table 3.2, it is obvious that the percentage of widows in East Java as well as in Indonesia in general is much higher than that of widowers. This difference is caused by, first, the higher life expectancy of women (62 years) than of men (59 years) and the stronger tendency among widowers to re-marry than among widows; second, the practice of polygamy by men; and third, the men's preference for choosing a younger woman as wife.

These statistical facts are useful to give a general background about the incidence of losing a spouse. However they should be connected with the insights on individual experiences. For this purpose, two cases are chosen as illustrations, namely the case of Mardi (49) a widower who lives in an alley next to Kacangan alley, and Ami (54) a widow who also lives in the same alley as Mardi. Although they are neighbours, Mardi and Ami only have contact with each other for formal matters especially because Mardi is the neighbourhood head. However, in the past Mardi was a friend of Ami's husband and Ami was a friend of Mardi's wife.

Mardi is a light-skinned and slim man who speaks calmly with an obvious Javanese dialect. In the interviews Mardi answered the questions carefully and emphasized his information with a formal gesture. Mardi was also very much aware of his position as one of the _kyais_ (Islamic leaders) in the neighbourhood. He often answered my questions by referring to the Koran, even when he was trying to describe his love to his deceased wife.
Mardi's wife died in 1995 after she gave birth to their fourth child. The child also died a few hours later. Now, Mardi is living with his three children: Fenny (23), Aldi (20) and Ina (18). Mardi's daughters, Fenny and Ina, do most of the household chores. According to Fenny and Ina, sometimes, their father also cooks and cleans up their house. But their brother Aldi does not feel obliged to help his sisters. It seems to me that the boy's privilege is actually accepted by everyone in the family. In Mardi's eyes, the additional tasks are good for the girls, "I know that my daughters have to do more household chores, but this is a good training for them. They will learn to be an independent person. I think I can trust my daughters. But I have a problem with my son. He has to learn more about responsibility". However, the girls do wish to have less domestic tasks although they never talk about it openly to their father.

Both Fenny as well as Ina complained about the difficulty of communicating with their father. "I know that bapak (father) is sometimes emotionally vulnerable. At such moments he cries silently or he says to me that he remembers ibu (mother). But he is not an easy person to talk with. He always keeps a distance from us. When she was alive, our mother had functioned as a bridge between father and us. We had a much closer and warmer relationship with her".

Fenny said that she could not blame her brother Aldi for his troublesome relation with the father, since Mardi was often too rigid with his own principles. "Bapak should know that we are young and we want to enjoy our free time. We like to see the movie or do something else just to have fun. But as usual he would not allow us. I do not dare to talk about this with him, moreover why should I give him additional burden? The death of our mother still hurts him"

I asked Mardi how he communicates with his adolescent children. He said, "I do not talk too much to my children. Usually, I only watch them. It is enough, since I can understand my children by carefully watching them!" According to Mardi, he even did not give the money for daily expenditures directly\(^5\) to his daughters. He just silently put the money in the kitchen, and his daughters also would use it without saying a word to the father.

When we talked about re-marriage, Mardi said, "I never say that I will never marry again. I just do not think about it. Allah has given me a fine partner, but He took her back. This is His will, I thanked Him for the good years I had with my wife". However, he admitted that, sometimes, his relatives, friends even close neighbours made polite remarks about the

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\(^5\)In Java, a husband's act of giving directly his earning to his wife is called *mblanjani*. This also reflects (and is regarded as) one of the important husband's obligations towards his wife, which is symbolically shown in the Javanese wedding ritual.
possibility of remarriage. He was aware of the social expectation, but he was proud of his way of thinking: not every widower would remarry as soon as possible.

Ami is a heavily built woman who can laugh loudly, not typical for a Javanese woman. Ami also liked to tell me in great detail about her life, especially about her youth. During the interviews, she told me about her 30 years of marriage in constantly changing moods: smiles, loud laughs, angry tones and even tears. It was obvious that Ami's marriage was not an easy one. Although it had its romantic times, it was also coloured by child deaths, betrayals, and financial problems.

Ami gave birth to ten children, but only six of them could reach their adolescence. All of them are boys. The oldest son is 26 years and the youngest 14 years. One of these boys is married, but he still asks money from his widowed mother since he has no steady job yet. Two other sons are working in a shop and financially supporting their family. These boys' earnings, although they are very limited, are the financial pillars of the household.

During the day, Ami usually spends her time alone at home. After cooking the meal, she usually watches soap operas and waits for the boys to come home from school. Ami has never been working outside her house and earning money independently. Now, she is entirely dependent on her sons' financial support. "This is the way I shall spend my life, I never think about finding a job. I do not have the capability for that. My life has never been easy, but I was a faithful wife for my husband and now I think that I do my best to take care of my boys. I only hope that our financial problems do not impose too many pressures on my oldest son. He is a good and responsible young man, unlike his father! However, I still think about the boys' father...that naughty husband, after his death only few things are left to be enjoyed in my life". Then she cried again.

*Gender roles in Java*

Gender roles are social products which are shaped and reshaped through social processes, including socialization, and social institutions (Davidson, 1979:1). Therefore, in an analysis of gender the social context is very important. In this research, the social context is the Javanese norms and values.

According to Mulder (1994: 62) the symbolic value of men and women in Java appears to show a strong differentiation that indicates the supremacy of the value in different realms in life. The male area is the outside world of politics and power, works, position, prestige and hierarchy. The female area is the inside world of home, care and nurture. Sullivan (1995:141-153) differentiates these two areas as the public-political domain and the private-domestic
domain. Based on this differentiation, men are expected to be self-restrained, dignified, somewhat removed from daily care and representing the family's honour. While women are supposedly more earthy, actively caring for things and tend to be described as more emotional and uncontrolled. Consequently, women are neither physically nor spiritually powerful (Keeler, 1990:131). But these images do not mean that women are less appreciated than men. Unlike in India or China, there is no preference for male children in Java. Many parents prefer a daughter as their first child because they can rely on her for care in their old age.

There is also a kind of fluidity in the practice of these gender images and roles. Women who gain respectable positions in the public sphere are common in Java. Javanese husbands also help their wives to do some households chores or take care of their small children. This fluidity is influenced by the higher preference for differentiation according to social status. As noted by Keeler (1990:128), 'Javanese tie different social attitudes to gender, but they tie such attitudes to social status as well'. Aristocratic or other wealthy women in Java often demonstrate dignity and grace when they appear in public. At the village level for example, the wife of a village head surely gains a high position in the village social hierarchy. Thus, although gender difference is used ‘ [...] to distinguish individuals in Java, the distinctions based on style and status is used as much as or even more than gender’ (Keeler, 1990: 129)

Expressing grief

Within the Javanese context, high status whether achieved or ascribed, implies that a person possesses considerable potency that is associated with some behavioural style such as refinement, self-restrained and calm (Keeler, 1990:131). As mentioned above, men are more tied to this style than women. In the case of losing a spouse a widower expresses his grief differently than widows.

When the doctors had to tell Mardi that they failed to help his wife from the difficult delivery, they were afraid of Mardi's anger. "The doctors were surprised when I just asked them to pray for my wife's soul. Yes, it was a very difficult moment but I should control my emotions". His grief was veiled by patience and self-control.

A contrasting situation was sketched by Ami," At the day when my husband died, I could not think about anything else than my wish to die with him. My children only vaguely existed for me. I got sick for a few weeks and didn't know who was taking care of my boys. Until one night I had a nightmare about my youngest son. I saw that he was badly ill and neglected. Yes, my boys were desperately needing their mother". In this drama of losing a
spouse, Ami does not have to cover her grief as carefully as Mardi since, as a woman, she is allowed to show less self-control.

During the funeral ceremonies, Javanese widows only occupy a very limited place in the public domain. The funeral ceremony will be led by one of her male relatives or oldest adult son. This arrangement can relieve widows from the burden to act within the formal situation while she is still in an emotionally unstable circumstance. On the contrary, widowers are expected to be present in the public domain and usually have an active role in the funeral ceremony. In order to accomplish this duty, widowers have to cautiously manage their emotions.

Within the informal sphere, usually at the back of the house, widows are less constrained in expressing their grief and getting emotional comfort from other women. In the formal sphere of the funeral ceremony, it is not only the widowers who should master their emotions; other male visitors also express their condolence in an emotionally restrained way.

However this kind of prescribed male or female attitudes does not exclusively occur in Javanese society. In other word this gender differentiation is also shared by other societies. To give an instance, Os (1997), in his research on widows in Spain, demonstrates that widows can cope with the loss of their spouse better than widowers because widows have more opportunity to express and to deal with their grief.

According to her, for widows, one of the ways to cope with their loss and grief is exerting the mourning customs. These customs provide a chance for them to recover from the painful experience in socially accepted manners. These customs also give time for widows to adjust with the changes before they continue their life. On the contrary, widowers do not practice the mourning customs. They are expected to return to their 'normal' life as soon as possible. This expectation can be seen as a kind of social denial to the widowers' loss and grief, a denial that can impose more emotional burdens on the widowed men.

**Relationships with children**

The self-restraint ideal and the burden of formality not only constrain Javanese widowers in expressing and coping with their grief, but also in gaining emotional support.

As the head of the family, Javanese men exercise the authority that can assure and maintain the prestige, dignity and influence of the family in the community. The household is commonly organized in such a way that it supports the father in the role of family head and protects him from conflict especially with his children. Children are taught to be wedi (afraid) of their father and to obey him. This attitude especially has to be demonstrated in their speech.
But with their mother, they can maintain a much more casual tone. Thus, while a father is entitled to the highest honour and is hierarchically far away, a mother is an approachable and loving person (Keeler, 1990 and 1987; Mulder, 1994).

The character of a distant father is obviously shown by Mardi. Although he acknowledges the importance of a good relation with his children, he refuses to talk with them. Mardi only talks with his children about 'formal matters' such as the progress of their education. In the practice, this kind of family conversation means that the children have to tell the father about their school and he will give them some suggestions. However, these suggestions would not be discussed further.

It seems that Mardi's children find a way to cope with this communication gap. Fenny said, "Fortunately three of us can work together and protect each other. I often have to lie to my father about Aldi. If he goes somewhere with his friends I will tell father that he has a special activity in his school. Usually, father believes me. What should we do? We need to go out with our friends"

The case of Mardi shows that a distant but respectful father will function well only when there is an approachable mother to link him with other family members. When the link is absent, the distant father will run the risk of being excluded from real family ties. He will be left alone in his prestigious position. The stronger emotional ties among the children themselves actually have placed Mardi outside the family warmth that he needs to cope with his loss and loneliness.

Ami does not have communication failures with her sons simply because she has no serious barrier to talk with her sons. She can ask silly questions or give silly answers to them, or even confront small conflicts with the children without being afraid of losing her position of respect. As noted by Keeler (1990:1-40) Javanese women are effective because they are deemed relatively lacking in potency and thought to be in relatively lower status. Hence, they are allowed to communicate in a more informal way. The lack of formality in communicating with her children means that Ami has a better opportunity to enjoy the children's affection. Moreover, she can share her feelings with the boys and gain emotional support from them in a more open manner.

*The neighbourly relations*

J. Sullivan's (1992:104) differentiation of public and private domain in a Javanese neighbourhood is useful for illuminating the gender aspect of neighbourly relationships. Without underestimating its fluidity, this differentiation assumes that a family has
representatives in both domains. This assumption is, however, problematic for the single-parent families. If we go back to two cases mentioned above, fortunately, the Mardi’s family has an adult daughter to act on behalf of the deceased mother and Ami’s family has an adult son to act as a representative of the deceased father. However, this is not always the case.

I met widows who do not have the chance to participate in and to benefit from formal neighbourly occasions, such as *kenduren*, because there is no adult male in their household who can be sent to the occasion as the household’s representative. During my stay in the alleys, I often got involved in neighbourly occasions such as *selamatan*. If I did not work in the kitchen, I got the task of delivering the *berkat* (a small food package which is given to the neighbours). The best *berkat* were usually given to neighbours with higher social standing (the well-to-do neighbours, the neighbourhood head, the market controller) and male attendants of the ceremony. Households that did not have a male member, and therefore, could not send a representative to the ceremony, commonly would not get the better packages. If these households also belonged to the lower social-economic layer of the neighbourhood, then they would only get the remaining packages that had an incomplete content. Poor widowed women who live alone often face this kind of unequal redistribution among neighbours. Widowed men are usually invited to join the ceremony, and therefore receive a good package.

Generally, widowers have a different role than widows although they have the same position as a household head. As noted by Hetler (1990,196-197), ‘Social expectations concerning the role of head are that women heads are not required to participate directly in civic events, while male heads must participate [...] This gender difference in participation levels is an extension of gender differences that cut across public life [...] Men, whether heads or not, are active participants in local meetings [...] including ritual feasts and other quasi-religious and official holiday events [...] Women are noticeably absent at public events and meetings where men are active participants [...] Women display little interest in and generally have little idea of how certain activities and procedures operate in the civic-political life of the village [or the city neighbourhoods -RM] since these activities are almost totally in the hands of men’

Does this absence of widows as household heads in the public-political life of the neighbourhood lead to the lack of access to information on formal matters? Under the New Order regime, formalization in various aspects of social life was a ubiquitous fact. The neighbourly public and formal domain is actually owned both by men as well as women, although their public domains more or less exist separately. Through a women’s organisation that operates at the national level such as the *Pembinaan Kesejahteraan Keluarga* or the PKK.
(The Family Welfare Development Program), women in many Indonesian neighbourhoods, including the widows, are regularly informed about important formal matters, such as the period when the *kartu keluarga* (the family card) must be renewed or the dates of *kerja bakti* (obligatory community work involving large numbers of people).

In brief, the gender role differences in neighbourly relationships do not always lead to social exclusion for widows. However, this differentiation can exclude widows (and other categories of spouse-less women) from participating in some neighbourly occasions. These occasions often involve redistribution of food, which can help the poorer neighbours to deal with their day-to-day economic problems.

5. The Widows of the Alleys

*Personal attributes*

Most of the widows (83%) are older than 50 years, with an average age of 63 years. The majority of them are middle-aged women with adult children. Because of their age, these widows are often confronted with health problems. They often told me about their diseases such as hypertension, diabetes mellitus, asthma, and rheumatism. Therefore, the problems of ageing and care of the elderly are important issues to be connected with the discussion of the widows’ well being. A few cases below will illustrate how some widows’ struggle with their health problems and the absence of carers.

Mbah Sarah (82) lives alone in an old house in Semeru alley. Each time she got a rheumatic attack, she was in serious trouble since she could not walk and nobody could care for her intensively. Mbah Sarah said, "I have spent a great deal of my time to take care other people, my parents, my husband, and one of my sister when they were sick for a long period. But now, when my difficult time is coming I have no one to take care of me. This is the disadvantage of surviving many people who were close to me ". However, when mbah Sarah’s health really got worse she still could invite a distant relative to take care of her for a few weeks. Another childless old widow in the neighbourhood, mbah Nah (70), who lived alone in a wooden house at the alley’s local market, did not have any contact with her relatives. Consequently, while mbah Sarah still could fall back on her distant relatives when her illness got worse, bu Nah has none at all.

In Kacangan alley, I met bu Asram (78), bu Nur (70) and bu Supri (47) who became an integrated member of their child’s household. For these widows, old age care or other practical support is relatively secured since their close relatives surround them. In these cases,
the potential problem for getting care in old age is not the absence of carers but the fluctuations of the personal relationships between the widows and the carers such as like and dislike.

The fact that most widows are middle aged or old women does not put these widowed women in a similar life situation. They represent a wide range of socio-economic position from a poor petty trader who does not always have enough earning to buy her daily food, a respectable pensioner and landlady to a quite successful shop owner. Whatever the real amount of their earnings, 34% of the widows are still working. The table below shows that almost all of these working widows gain their income in so called self-employed occupations especially in petty trading.

Table 3.3: Number of widows per category income generating activities (N=111)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income Generating Activity</th>
<th>Number of widows</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mobile petty trader</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Market petty trader</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shopkeeper</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Cooked) food seller</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Landlady</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factory worker</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massause, housemaid</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pensioner</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do not have a paid work and do not receive a pension</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>111</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Almost one third (28%) of the widows lost their spouses more than 20 years ago, 42% have been widowed for 6 to 20 years and 30% for less than five years. But the length of widowhood does not always reflect the widows' age. In all alleys, I met old widows who were recently widowed. The variation in the length of widowhood does not differentiate one widow from another. As it is said before, there is no strong mourning custom in Java nowadays. Therefore, depending on their emotional circumstances, the recently widowed women can perform their daily activities more or less as usual. They may go to the market, clean up their
houses or attend neighbourhood meetings. There is no special mark of widowhood in their appearance. Even in the funeral ceremony these recently widowed women do not always wear black or dark colours. At a funeral, I asked one of the family members why the widow did not wear black or dark colours. This person was surprised by my question, "Wearing black in a funeral such as in the sinetron (Indonesian soap opera)? Oh, no, we do not have to do it!"

Almost half of the widows (41%) have always lived in kotamadya/kodya (municipality of) Malang, 24% had come from kabupaten (regency of) Malang, 29% had come from other places inside East Java and only 6% had come from outside East Java.

About one third (32%) of the migrant widows had moved to kodya Malang because of their marriage, 31% came because they had searched for better work, and 29% because they were brought to the city by their parents. The majority of the widows (93%) have been living in the city for more than 20 years. Even the migrant widows are thus long-term residents of Malang.

As long-term residents of the city, many of the migrant widows do not have a connection with their village of origin any longer. The Madurese widows in Kacangan alleys do not return to Madura island for an important religious feast like lebaran simply because they do not have relatives in the village of origin any longer. One of them told me, "Why should I go back to my village? My parents died and were buried here in Malang, my children live in Malang, and I do not have any close relatives in the village anymore. I was a small girl when my parents had brought me here in Malang...so, I am orang Malang (an inhabitant of Malang).

Even those who still have family in the village of origin cannot always successfully maintain a good relationship with their family. A family conflict in the past, lack of financial resources for the trip, or simply lack of interest were mentioned as the reasons of losing contact with family in the village.

Most of the widows (79%) are Javanese, 16% are Madurese and 5% are Chinese. All of the Madurese widows live in the alleys of Kotalama (including Kacangan alley). As can be expected, 88% of the widows are Moslems, 10% are Protestants and 2% are Catholics.

Their recent living conditions

Only 10% of the widows live alone, 27% live with the school-aged, unmarried, never married, widowed or divorced children. The majority of the widows (53%) live with their married children (including daughters/sons in law and grandchildren). However, living with married children does not necessary mean that the widows have become dependent members of their
children's household. A few of them are the heads of these households since the married children are those who have moved into their mothers' houses. As household heads, the widows are also able to finance most of the household expenditures.

Bu Umi (57) in Semeru alley is a good example of the widows who occupy this respectable position. She has income from different sources: a well-run shop in front of her house, a lodging house with 6 rooms and a widow pension. She lives with two sons, two daughters in law and a baby grandson. By regulating the division of labour among the family members, especially the daughters-in-law, bu Umi is obviously the manager of this extended family.

Many widowed mothers have asked one of the children and his/her family to live with her based on a combination of some reasons such as affection and old age care. Thus, the widows provide a home for the young couples and in return the young couples provide old age care for the widowed mothers. This situation is further also supported by the fact that 75% of the widows are owners of the house.

Young widows (below 30 years) usually go back to their parental house until they remarry. This is especially so, if they do not have sufficient income to raise their young children on their own. Maimunah (20) is a young widow in Kacangan alley. Her husband died in a street fight. "After my husband's death I returned to my parents' house because I was afraid to live in my own house alone. Moreover, I can not raise my two sons alone since I don't have enough income".

The widows' housing conditions show a wide range of variation from houses with brick-walls (90%), half brick-walls (5%) and wooden walls (5%). All of the widows’ houses have electricity. Only 8 of these houses lack sanitary facilities and running water.

More than 71% of the widows inhabit houses that can be considered as 'complete' houses with sanitary facilities, tap water and appropriately furnishing. Within this kind of house, middle class luxuries like radio, tape recorder, television, or (in a few cases) refrigerator, can also be seen. A pensioner widow in Semeru alley even has a washing machine.

Most of the pensioner widows live in Javanese neighbourhoods such as Kauman and Purwodadi. None of the Madurese widows or their deceased husband worked as pegawai negeri (government official) or in the armed forces. Therefore, none of them receives a pension.
6. Concluding Remarks

In urban neighbourhoods of Java, widows are not simply object of compassion or mockery. The images and identities of widows are in a complex way influenced by personal elements (the widows' age, physical condition, income generating activity etc) and socio-cultural elements (religious ideas, state ideology, local custom etc).

In all alleys, the way widowhood is experienced, is strongly influenced by Islam in the sense that this religion neither compels long term seclusion as a reflection of mourning nor discourages a remarriage. As a result, widows can fully participate in the social life and remarry if they want to. Moreover, as it is strongly encouraged by the state ideology, the widows' wifely and motherly identities are usually more dominant than their identity as widows.

Although widows tend to be confused with other types of spouse-less women (divorced women, deserted women, spinster), a few differences can be found among them. They refer to some interrelated aspects. Compared with the other spouse-less categories, widows are emotionally and socially more associated with inevitable loss. Legally they are entitled to more sources of inheritance and income (pension) than the other categories of spouse-less women.

It is also obvious that the incidence of widowhood in East Java and Indonesia in general is much higher among women than among men. The difference between widowhood among men and women can also be found in various ways that are connected by gender roles. Since women are commonly perceived as more emotional and less restrained, widows can express and communicate their grief more openly than widowers. Being the representative of family honour, men have to protect their respectful position with formalities, also towards their own children. Consequently, fathers often have a more distant relationship with their children especially when these children become adults. On the other hand, women are not burdened by such a position in the family. They can communicate, negotiate and if necessary have conflict with their children without being afraid of losing respect. Therefore, as mothers, widows can have closer relationships with their children than widowers as fathers.

Widowhood also has different consequences for women and for men in their participation in neighbourly occasions such as the selamatan or kenduren. These occasions are only attended by men as the representative of their households, therefore widows who do not have an adult male as household members cannot benefit from the redistribution of food through these occasions. For old and poor widows this exclusion is quite a loss since the food redistribution can be a relief, although an irregular one, for the day-to-day cash and food shortage.
As stated in the introductory section, this chapter aims at providing a general description about the research population (111 widows). From this description it can be concluded that the majority of the research population are middle aged women, therefore the problem of getting old age care (when it is needed) is very relevant for them. In general widows represent a wide range of socio-economic position, but specifically, regarding their socio-economic position, the research population can be described as belonging to the so called lower-middle class to lower class. More than half of them do not work any longer. Included in this category are the pensioners; a group that is often better off than other widows because they are entitled to a stable and independent income. Those who are still working mostly have a self-employed occupation in petty trading.

The lengths of their widowhood vary, but the recently widowed women usually cannot be easily distinguished from those who have been a widow for a long period. In urban Java widows are not obliged to mark their widowhood in their appearance. Widows can have a relatively similar social life as before their widowhood. Therefore widows are inseparable from the neighbourhoods' daily scene. They are mothers, grandmothers, daughters, sisters, aunts etc. and can be met in many corners of the neighbourhoods.

The majority of widows have relatives who also live in the city; therefore the absence of family members for taking care of the old widowed mother is not a serious problem for many of the widows. However, this fact does not say much about the sufficiency of the family support. The sufficiency of support cannot be guaranteed only by the presence of the (potential) support providers. In the following chapters this issue will be examined in detail.