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

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Chapter 4
THE PRECARIOUS SAFETY NET
Family Support for Widows

1. Introduction

A safety net can be understood as something which people hope that they will never have to use, and which they hope will never be needed. If necessary, however, the safety net will catch them (Finch, 1989). In this chapter, family support can be perceived as a safety net in the sense that the support is expected to provide back up to family members during a period of hardship. Nevertheless, whether or not people hope that they will never have to use it, this safety net is often perceived as being very important in a country such as Indonesia where the public welfare system is almost absent. To what extent does family support, as a safety net, provide the expected back up and how?

In various studies, social changes caused by processes such as migration, fertility decline, changing values in society etc., are often seen as being responsible for the weakening of the support relation among family members. It is also said that a consequence of this weakening is the no longer - not yet state (Vatikiotis, 1996; Niehof, 1995; Lopata, 1987). A state where the existing safety net is in the process of disintegrating, while its replacement is still out of sight. However, this concept needs closer scrutiny since it can be overly coloured by the romanticising of family ties in the past.

This chapter will not pay special attention to discussion over whether or not family support is weakening. The issue of family support will be related to various problems faced by widows who live in urban Java. The chapter aims to examine the ways in which family support for widows works. This point of departure is chosen because, firstly, it does not presume a golden age of kinship ties and support among family members in the past that probably never existed. Secondly, it opens the possibility for an analysis of how family support intertwines with support provided by other institutions or networks.

In order to achieve the chapter’s aim several questions will be answered, namely; what kinds of family support are gained and received by the widows, and in what circumstances? Who are the support providers? What determines the widows’ access to certain kinds of support? The chapter will be organised around these questions.
But first, some theoretical points of view of support will be discussed. Section three is a brief description on the widows' families. In section four, five and six different kinds and forms of support will be elaborately examined. In this examination, I also pay attention to the support providers. The access to family support will be the focus of the section seven. In the eighth section I shall analyse what happen to the widows who have no families. The chapter will be closed with some concluding remarks in section nine.

2. Support Relationships Among Family Members

In this section I shall highlight some issues that will function as an analytical guide to the discussion of the empirical data in the following sections. Nevertheless, these issues are not only relevant to understanding support relations among family members but also to understanding other support relationships, for instance those among neighbours or friends. In this section the issues will be discussed in connection with the specificity of family ties.

Multiplicity of support relationship

People are usually involved in different sets of support relations, either as a provider or as a receiver of the support. Inspired by the concept of legal pluralism, Franz and Keebet von Benda-Beckmann (1994:9) have addressed a comparable issue as ‘multiplicity of social security’. According to them people usually indulge in different relationships. Based on these relationships, they form a mixture of various social security arrangements. The engagement in multiple support relations among family members is made possible by the fact that the relations among family members are not limited by their residential arrangement. Safilios-Rothschild (1980:314) argues that ‘[...] men, women and children may be involved in a number of different sets of relations with kin who may not reside in the same household. These different sets of relations, each with distinct rights and obligations, may be partially overlapping in membership and may extend over several residentially separated households’.

Widows gain and receive support from different combinations of family members such as their parents and siblings or their (adult) children and siblings etc. Similarly, if we look from the providing end, a support provider in the family often cares for a few kin members, for example, his/her own widowed mother, the parents-in-law and a school age sibling.

Regarding the Javanese and Madurese kinship system, the bilaterality of these systems can also encourage these multiple support relations. In this system, descent is reckoned both
through the male and female line with relatives both sides being equally important (Geertz, H., 1961:15, Niehof, 1985:87 and Mulder, 1996:95). However, the equal importance of family lines can raise an ambiguity in the practice of providing and receiving support. On the one hand, people can – to some extent - choose whom to provide support for or to receive it from. On the other hand, they (especially as support providers) can be burdened by claims for support from both the male and female lines. Therefore, it is also important to devote attention to the degree of relationship, since this will influence the quality of the relation itself. According to H. Geertz (1961:25), ‘The limit of spread of kinship is indefinite, but the Javanese make some distinction between “near kin” (sedulur tjedak) and “distant kin” (sedulur adoh). The first group are, usually, one’s four grandparents and their descendants, that are, one’s uncles, aunts, and grandparents (the immediate family of one’s parents), their children and grandchildren, and one’s own children and grandchildren - with possible addition of one’s great-grandparents, and great-grandchildren’.

As the data in the following sections will demonstrate, the distinction between near and distant kin is too general for analysing the reliability of support provided by different providers. Moreover, the quality of support relations among those who are described by H. Geertz as the near kin is not similar. These ‘near kin’ members need to be differentiated further as: the first-degree relatives (one’s parents, children and siblings), the second-degree relatives (one’s grandparents, grandchildren, uncles, aunts, cousins), the third degree relatives etc. The examinations in other sections will show that, in general, the first-degree relatives are the primary support providers¹.

Fluidity of support relationship
Similar to support relationship in general, familial support relationship is fluid because it is continuously adjusted and negotiated both by the support providers as well as by the support receivers. These adjustments (either in a positive or negative term) and negotiations can be stimulated by different factors.

Firstly, the fluctuation of support claims at the receiving end is not always compatible with the ability to support at the providing end. A difficult situation can occur when the availability of support means (cash, goods, labour) is not elastic enough to deal with the increasing claims for support. In this situation people may even be forced to reallocate their support. The case of Trisna (58) will illustrate this factor.

¹ A comparable differentiation (‘inner’ and ‘outer’ circles) is also discussed by Finch (1989:239).
One day, Trisna, a widow in the Kemirahan alley complained to me that she had financial problems because her daughter did not send her the *uang bulanan* (monthly financial support) that month. The financial support was withdrawn because the money was used to cover another expenditure. One of the widow’s *besan* (son in law’s parents) was ill and needed an extra financial support for medication. Consequently, Trisna’s *uang bulanan* had been reallocated for the medical expenses of the sick *besan*. Other widows also described similar situations. Financial support from the widows’ children can be reduced or postponed because these children have other extra expenditures such as buying new school uniforms or books and paying tuition fees for their own children, house repairing etc.

The case above also shows the ambiguity of multiple support relationships in a bilateral kinship system. These multiple support relations are not mutually exclusive. They are connected to each other like the threads of a web. Changes and adjustment of one support relation can influence other support relationships.

Secondly, there may be changes in the quality of relationship. This factor is related to the differentiation of ‘near’ and ‘distant’ kin (H.Geertz, 1961) or the ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ circles (Finch, 1989). This differentiation implies not only one’s position within the genealogical tree but also emotional distance among relatives. It is commonly assumed that people are more emotionally attached to those who are considered as near kin or belong to the inner circle. They are also assumed to be more obliged to support and have a stronger right to claim support from their near kin. However, studies in different contexts have shown that the boundaries of ‘near – distant’ and ‘inner – outer’ are not fixed. According to Finch (1989:239) ‘[...] there are considerable variations between kin groups as to precisely who is included, and this itself can change over time’. Thus, having a certain position within the genealogical trees, which is more or less fixed, cannot assure a fixed engagement in a support relation. In practice, the obligation and right related to this position have to be effectuated by the actual emotional bonds, which are changeable. Why does the quality of relationship among relatives change? Some reasons for changes are noted by Geertz (1961:25): ‘A close relative may become, in effect, distant as a result of a quarrel, geographic distance or his moving into another class; one who is distant kin may, through prolonged geographical proximity, or by joining the household, develop a more intense personal relationship with a group of his distant kin and come to be considered one of the family’

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2 The context of Geertz’s study is Java in the 60s and the context of Finch’s study is Britain in the late 80s
However, regarding the complexity of family ties, these reasons — although they are noteworthy - should not be understood in absolute terms. Let us take the geographic distance as an example. It is true that people, including relatives, tend to be less tied (emotionally) to each other when the geographical distance among them increases. But, there are enough cases, which show that family members, especially the first-degree relatives, still support each other although they do not live near each other. In other words, their support relation quality is less bound to propinquity. Hashimoto et al (1992:298) also argued “Changes in residential pattern result in a shift in the kind of support given, but not necessarily in the inherent value of family support”. A daughter who has migrated to another place may no longer be able to provide a certain form of support, for example personal care, to her widowed mother. Nevertheless, a support relationship between mother and child in these circumstances is more likely to be continued — although in other forms — than those among neighbours when they have moved out from the neighbourhood.

Thirdly, there may be changes of roles (the provider and the receiver) in support relations throughout the different life stages. Under the issue of continuity in family support, Hashimoto et al (1992:297) highlighted one of the specific characteristics of family support namely, the present of ‘[...] personal bonds of intergenerational affection, obligation and care [...]’ which implies ‘[...] an interdependency among generations across the lifespan’. It is not unusual that a widowed mother, who is now receiving support from her married children, was a support provider for the young couple during the first years of the couple’s marriage. It is conceivable that this intergeneration interdependency and reciprocity is also maintained by younger and older neighbours, but in family support the personal bonds among people from different generations are commonly more intensive and stable as they are coloured by the stronger emotional ties and connected with the irrevocable positions within the genealogical tree. This issue shall be highlighted again in section eight when the role of children as support providers is examined.

3. The Widows’ Families

The majority (90%) of the widows have children who live in Malang. It is quite rare for a widow to live completely alone because all of her children have migrated outside Malang. Commonly, there will be - at least - one or two children who live in the city or even in the same neighbourhood. Therefore, the picture of widowed mothers who are neglected by their migrated children can be misleading. 80% of the widows live together with one or more
married children either in a join household or as a dependent member of the household. Even the childless widows (about 11%) have adopted their distant families and live with these adopted children.

In all alleys, many of the migrated children have a better education. They need to develop themselves in bigger cities such as Jakarta, Bandung, Surabaya and are even sent to other islands for a special position or job.

In the places with lower socio-economic condition such as the Kacangan alley and Talun market in Semeru alley, many widows have their own children as their next-door neighbours. Most of these (adult) children only finished primary school, occupy a low paid job (petty trader, parking man, tailor etc.) and settle down in Malang without any plan for migration.

Thirteen percent of the widows do not have siblings or close relatives at all. 20% of them only have siblings or close relatives who live outside Malang and more than half of the widows (67%) have siblings or other close relatives in Malang. Therefore, it is not uncommon that the widows’ other relatives – especially siblings - also live in the same neighbourhood. The intertwining of family and neighbourly ties among these (female) relatives has resulted in a tight chat group. I could find a few of this kind of chat group. They gather almost every day and watch their favourite soap operas after they finish some household chores.

In general, the widows do not have close relationships with their marital family, even before the death of their husbands. The relations with their in-laws were often described as ‘distant’ or ‘troublesome’. Some of them have not seen their in-laws for many years and do not have any intention of doing so in the future. Consequently, support relations with the in-laws are almost completely absent.

4. Economic Support

Different purposes of support
Based on its purpose, economic support can be differentiated into, first, support for coping with daily problems, which can be provided weekly, monthly or even irregularly (only when the provider's economic situation allows). Second, support for coping with problems, which arise under special circumstances such as hospitalisation, funeral, selamatan (ritual feast), lebaran (the feast at the end of Islamic fasting month) etc.

Economic support for daily needs is usually provided by the closest family members like children and parents. In the interviews, only a few widows would openly and exactly tell
me about the amount of the money they received. Nevertheless, the amount and the regularity of the financial support can be traced from the term they used for it namely, *uang jajan* (pocket money) or *uang bulanan* (monthly support). The term of *uang jajan* is used for small, irregularly given amounts of financial support, while *uang bulanan* is used for a larger amount, which is provided once a month. A widow in Semeru alley even called the monthly financial support from her son, who works at a bank in Jakarta, ‘an old age pension from my son’. The economic support for daily needs can range from Rp 4000 up to Rp 300,000/month.

Economic support for special purposes is usually given by close relatives (parents, children, siblings) as well as by more distant relatives (in laws, nieces, nephews, uncles, etc.). Although in general the widows expressed uneasiness at receiving money or gifts from people who were not their close relatives, a special occasion or circumstance is considered as a legitimate and proper reason for it. The abundance of gifts (both food as well as money) given by relatives (and neighbours) in a selamatan for instance, will result in a positive image for the person who holds the ritual feast. The case of bu Sar’s feast below will illustrate this.

In October 1997, bu Sar, a 53 years old widow in Semeru alley, held a ritual feast for the 1000th day of her husband’s death. It was a very important day for her, which had been prepared carefully for weeks. The close family members had been helping her two days before with cooking and preparing the *berkat* (a plastic basket filled with various kind of food to be given to the feast attendants). Distant family members and neighbours came on the day the feast was held. When I came, bu Sar showed me some big sacks full of rice, sugar, coffee and noodles, “My relatives brought all of these for me. They are very generous, aren’t they? Many of them have come from far to attend my feast”. It was obvious during our chat that on this special occasion bu Sar seriously stressed that the gifts were a reflection of respect and affection; they were not based on pity.

**Different forms of support**

The forms of economic support for widows can be categorised generally into: money transfers (gift, loan, payment), gifts in kind, and accommodation.

Let us go back to the two terms which are often used by the widows for describing financial gifts namely, the *uang jajan* and *uang bulanan*. In general, the *uang jajan* is more commonly perceived as a gift than the *uang bulanan*, therefore, the expectation on its

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3 About the terms I have used in the categorisation, see Finch (1989:15-17)
Regularities and sufficiency is also lower. Widows with an independent income usually regard the *uang jajian* as an extra income. They also often emphasised its symbolic function. As bu Atim (68), a pensioner who lives in Semeru alley, said, “Sometimes my children sent me some money for my *uang jajian*, but it is not meant to finance my daily necessities. It wouldn’t be enough anyway. This *uang jajian* shows that my children care about me and want to please me”. However, for some of the widows, the small and irregular *uang jajian* is the only access they have to cash. These widows are usually dependent members of their children’s household and relatively secured from basic needs. Consequently, their need for cash is easily overlooked. Bu Nur (70) in Kotalama said, “There is nothing I can do if my children have delayed the *uang jajian* for me. I can only wait and do not even dare to buy snacks for myself”.

Payments are also a common form of economic support. The widows often told me about *uang obat* or *uang dokter* (health care payment), *uang lampu* (electricity payment), *uang tiket* (ticket payment) etc. which were paid by their relatives. In some cases, the widows do not receive cash but they are released from a few monthly payments. In Kacangan alley, I met a widow who sold her own house to pay for the renovation of her widowed sister’s house. According to her, “I sold my house in order to renovate my sister’s house. Now, we have a larger and better house where we can live together. This is much better for all of us since I used to live alone in my house and my sister’s house badly needed a repairing”.

Loans, especially those with a low rate of interest or without interest, are also perceived as economic support. A long period of hospitalisation was often mentioned by the widows as a reason for borrowing money from their relatives. The case of bu Supri (47) in Kacangan alley illustrates this problem. According to bu Supri, her husband had suffered from cancer for months before he died. Her jewellery was sold for her husband’s hospitalisation and when he died, nothing was left for his funeral. Therefore, bu Supri had to borrow money from her parents. “My parents are farmers in Madura, mostly they do not have a big amount of cash, so they lent me a cow which was equal to Rp 400,000 without interest. This loan had helped me a lot to arrange a decent funeral. It also saved me from money lender’s high interest”.

Economic support is also often provided in kind. Bu Parmi (54) who lives in Kotalama gets 50 kg rice every month from one of her brothers in law. He works as a university lecturer and is entitled to 50 kg rice/month from the university. For higher rank employees like lecturers, this allotted free rice is usually perceived as less desirable because of its low quality. In the case of mbak Darmi, the rice allotment becomes a regular economic support in
kind for a widowed sister in law. Economic support in kind is also intensively given among family members at special occasions such as the lebaran (in the form of clothes or special food and beverage) or in a funeral (in the form of staple food).

Accommodation (living in a relative’s house for free) as a form of economic support is often age bound. Young widows return and live in their parental house and old widows can be taken in their child’s house. However as mentioned before, in some cases, co-residence means that a child and his/her family move into the widowed mother’s house.

According to Koentjaraningrat (1985:260) Javanese priyayi households often provide accommodation for needy family members based on the ngenger custom (sometimes it includes paying for education costs). This custom is practised to relieve their poorer relatives from the burden of childcare. He also wrote: ‘Widowed sisters and their children were often taken into the household. This custom is also called ngenger, and such relatives were treated in the same way as other ngenger relatives. Although ngenger relatives might be treated as servants, they were still allowed to sit on chairs, and eat at the same table with the family, which servants never did. After the 1920s, when more and more women received school education and were therefore able to assume an independent life, the ngenger custom gradually became a humiliating custom for widows4.

In my research I only encountered a few cases in which one of the widows’ children is taken by the better off relatives (mostly the widows’ siblings)5. There are widows who live with their never married or widowed sisters, but mostly they live together in their parental houses. Thus, it is better to be perceived as ‘women without men clustering’ than ngenger.

The support providers
Regardless to its sufficiency, 81% of the widowed respondents (90 out of 111 persons) acknowledged that they received economic support from their family members. Most of them

4 Although I agree on the importance of ngenger as a form of family support, I am not convinced that this custom gradually became less acceptable (for widows) because of the greater chance of school education for women after the 1920s. Generally in Indonesia, the access to (higher) education is relatively class bound. Thus, even after 1920, widows who are willing to be taken into a relative’s household are mostly those who are in a disadvantageous social-economic circumstance, and hence low in (or even without) education.

Although it is usually meant to help poor relatives, the ngenger custom also has its ‘dark’ side, since it can lead to intra-household infidelity, conflicts and in a few extreme cases to murder. In the late 1980s, a wife was chopped into more than 10 pieces by a desperate husband because she found out that her husband had an affair with a widowed niece who was taken into their house.

5 A good illustration for this issue can be found in Umar Khayam’s novel “Para Priyayi” (1992).
(82 out of 90 persons) got the support from their children\(^6\). Only 8 of the widows received economic support from relatives (parents, sibling, in laws) other than children.

The dominant role of children as the providers of economic support can be connected with the fact that, first, in most cases, the children have the strongest emotional attachment to the widows. Second, most of the widows’ children are economically active adults. Third, many of the widows’ siblings and in laws belong to the same age group as the widows and are often support receivers themselves. And fourth, most of the widows’ parents had died already.

In all alleys, very old (older than 70 years) and childless widows (or those who are abandoned by their children) are in the most severe economic circumstances (Marianti, 1999:14). As Noted by Esterman and Andrews (1992:286): ‘[…] the chances of receiving financial support from family increased with the number of children. Those who were childless were much less likely to have financial assistance from family and generally were in a less favourable family position’

Lopata (1987:5) argues that in many of the Middle East, Asian Pacific societies (discussed in her book), it is the son who is responsible for the economic support of elderly parents and widows. However, from my research I have learned that daughters have given economic support to their widowed mothers as much as sons. Hence, I agree with Finch (1989:15-16) that ‘[…] gender differences are probably not as straightforward as they first appear. [...] Usually women give smaller amounts of money than men, or gifts in kind. Only a minority of women are in a position where they have control over substantial financial resources; however, when they do have such control they give money [...] in the same way that men do’

In general, women are economically active in Java, and even if they do not have paid work, they usually act as the manager of household’s income (N. Sullivan: 1994). Thus married daughters have access to ‘manage’ their own household expenditures including putting aside some money to be given to their widowed mothers. More or less equally, as (main) breadwinners, sons can strongly influence the decision to allocate a part of their income for supporting their (own) widowed mother. The process of determining how much support to provide to whose family can lead a married couple into conflicts and the practise of secretly giving money to one’s own family.

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\(^6\) From these 82 widows, 68 of them only received the economic support from their children and 14 of them received it both from the children as well as from other family members (parents, siblings and in laws).
5. Emotional Support

In most of the interviews, the widows were more restrained in talking about their emotional circumstances than about their financial circumstances or social life. Nevertheless, it did not mean that they did not wish to talk about these matters. They preferred to discuss their emotional circumstances in a less emotional way. This preference was reflected by the fact that the interviews were scarcely interrupted by the widows’ emotional outburst or tears.7

Mbah Sarah (82), the oldest widow in Semeru alley, told me that she had witnessed those she loved passing away one by one, “I tried very hard to control my emotion. Crying would not bring them back to me; it would only hurt the deceased and me more badly. I had to let them go, so that they could rest in peace”. Bu Yun (66), a retired police officer, also told me how she tried to hide her tears during her husband’s funeral, “If I had to cry, I went to the bath room”. At a funeral of a next-door neighbour in Semeru alley, I saw how the widow tried to smile at the funeral attendants through her tears.

I often observed that during a funeral, the bereaved (especially the closest relatives of the deceased) were discouraged from crying or moaning intensely because it is believed that their tears would darken the deceased’s journey to the final destination and rest.8 This kind of beliefs can impose a pressure to control one’s emotion and to use indirect ways of expressing and communicating one’s grief. It can, therefore, be misleading to connect emotional support with serious conversations about the widows’ grief or loneliness, since simple chats about today’s menu, TV soap or people in the neighbourhood are the most common forms of daily emotional comfort.

7 It is interesting to be compared that Os’ (1997) interviews with widows in Spain had a much stronger and more open emotional expression. One of the important difference between widowhood in Spain and in Java is that mourning custom is still an important part of widowhood in Spain while it is barely practised in Java.

8 C. Geertz (1960:72) argued that, ‘The mode of Javanese funeral,[...], is not one of hysterical bereavement, unrestrained sobbing, or even of formalized shrieks of grief for the deceased’s departure. Rather it is a calm, undemonstrative, almost languid letting go, a brief ritualized relinquishment of a relationship no longer possible. Tears are not approved of and certainly not encouraged; and one sees remarkably few of them. The effort is to get the job done, not to linger over the pleasures of grief’.

‘Two reasons are given for the prohibition of tears near the corpse: it makes the atmosphere dark so that the deceased will have great difficulty finding his path to the grave; and it so upsets the deceased that he cannot bear to leave the house’ (Geertz,1960:70).

9 According to Keeler (1990:131), in Javanese context ‘women, in fact, tend to be described, whether individually or globally as emotional, crude, uncontrolled, uncontrollable, and likely to be somewhat ill-bred’.

Based on this kind of gender ideals, the acceptable manners of expressing grief and coping with emotional problems for widows differ from those for widowers, because Javanese men are expected to be more self-restrained than Javanese women (Marianti, 1998: 5-7)).
I agree with Finch (1989:33) on differentiating emotional support into routine support and crisis support. Routine emotional support is mainly related to the sharing and talking about daily problems and experiences. 70% of the widows said that they did not feel lonely since there were enough people around them to talk with (both family members as well as close neighbours). This fact was also reflected by the situation during the interviews. I was rarely able to talk with the widows without the presence of other people such as their children, grandchildren, other relatives or neighbours.

Lopata (1987:9) notes that emotional support is usually provided by people in a primary significant relationship to a person. This is confirmed by the data that demonstrates that almost 60% of the widows mentioned children and grandchildren as their daily confidants. Widows who live alone usually mentioned siblings, who also live alone the same neighbourhood, as confidants. A few widows who only live with young unmarried sons complained that they had to go to their neighbours\(^{10}\) for a chat since these young men were not home most of the time. On the contrary, daughters are more frequently available as chatting partners. However, the mother-daughter relationship should not be romanticised. The widowed mothers can have a conflictive relation with their daughters. A few of them have even been abandoned for years by their only daughters.

When I asked her, in the first interview, whether she had children or not, mbah Sarah (82) said that she did not have any. One day she told me that she actually had a daughter who lives in Jakarta now. “She did not listen to my advice and left me to marry a wrong man. Even when her father died she did not come home for the funeral.... what could I say? I should not weaken my health by moaning. I pretend that I never had a daughter”.

The emotional support in time of crisis will be especially important for widows in the very first phase of their widowhood; a period when they had to adjust with various changes in their lives.

\(^{10}\) It is worthwhile noting that the combination between neighbours and relatives who live nearby is often mentioned as a source of emotional support for widows. This combination shows how in the daily practice the family and neighbourly support are very much intertwined. See chapter 6 (the Support Intertwinement).
6. Practical-Instrumental Support

The various forms of instrumental support provided by the widows’ relatives can be categorised into: personal care, assistance in doing household chores and management, child care\(^\text{11}\), assistance in dealing with formal-official affairs.

**Personal care**

Finch (1989:26) relates ‘personal care’ to nursing activity. Nevertheless, she also opens the possibility of understanding ‘personal care’ not only as nursing care but also as ‘a constant or regular presence of another person who will ensure their safety’. This broader meaning of personal care will be used in this study, but first I shall pay attention to the more specific meaning of it namely, personal care as an assistance which is given to perform basic functions such as: cleaning oneself, dressing, eating, going to the toilet etc. These basic functions are also defined as physical activities of daily life (physical ADL) (Esterman and Andrews, 1992:278-279)

Only 1 out of 111 widows explicitly acknowledged that she needed assistance in doing the physical ADL. At the time of interview, this widow was 70 years and half-deaf. She had survived a stroke a few months before. The other 110 (a few of them were above 80 years) stated that they could clean themselves, go to the toilet, eat and walk without assistance from other people. However, this information needs further examination. From observation and a series of interviews I learned that many elderly widows, especially those with a chronic illness, had a fluctuating capability to do the physical ADL, and thus also a fluctuating need for personal care. They can perform the physical ADL independently when they are in better health, but during the period of illness they need assistance even to clean themselves. The case of mbah Sarah below illustrates the fluctuation.

Mbah Sarah (82) lives alone in an old house at the Semeru alley. Her only health problem is rheumatism. Because of this illness sometimes she has difficulties in walking, but most of the time she can perform the physical ADL. However, one day her illness became very serious and she could barely get up and walk for a few weeks. During the day, mbah Sarah was regularly helped by a next-door neighbour. “Especially at night I have to manage to

\(^{11}\) Only 2 out of 111 widows have small children, thus, assistance for child care is less relevant for most of the widows. These two young widows said that they could take care of their children by themselves since they had no paid job. Both of them are relatively protected from financial difficulties since they live with their working parents. They reciprocate the accommodation provided by their parents by doing most of the household chores.
do a few things by myself. I reach the toilet by walking very slowly and carefully. I clean myself only as much as I can. Some of my nephews have asked me to sell this house and move with them because I am getting older and weaker, however, I am still in doubt about it. I prefer to wait until I am sure whether I can get well again this time or not. If I really can not take care of myself any longer then I will move to their house...” During the worst period, mbah Sarah was accompanied and taken care of by one of her nieces. Several weeks later, mbah Sarah could walk again, although not as easy as previously. The idea of moving to her nephew’s house was totally erased from our conversations. She said that her life was back to normal and she was convinced that she could do many activities as good as usual.

I also had a chance to closely observe a case, in a somewhat different setting, which showed how a long period of ‘ups and downs’ of a widow’s health state, including hospitalisation, could cause a lot of tensions and even conflicts among family members as the providers of both practical as well as financial support.

Munah (78) was partially paralysed because of hypertension. Although Munah was placed and isolated in the intensive care unit (the ICU), the hospital regulation compelled that one of the sick person’s relatives or friends had to be present at the hospital as a kind of watcher. This meant that the ‘watcher’ had to sit in a wooden hospital chair outside the ICU room all night long and every night. For a period of more than three weeks, the family members had to decide daily ‘who would watch the sick person at the hospital tonight?’ One of the widow’s daughters was exhausted and got ill because of this ‘night watch’ regulation, still she said, “we have to follow the hospital regulation, besides, I think that it is a common practice”. It is interesting to note that, in a way that is often taken for granted, an external institution (in this case the hospital) can impose much additional burdens upon the care providers.

**Assistance in doing household chores**

Not all the widows, who were regularly helped by their relatives in doing households chores (shopping, cooking, doing the laundry, cleaning up the house etc.), explicitly acknowledged that they needed to be helped. The need for assistance in doing the household chores is strongly influenced by the widows’ health state. According to them, they did not always need to be assisted, “I asked for help only when I feel tired or sick, because if I felt that way I could not take water from the well”. A few widows need to be assisted more or less permanently in doing the household chores because they have suffered serious cataracts.
Fourteen percent of the widows acknowledged that they did not receive practical support to perform the household chores. Some of them rigorously stated that they did not need to be assisted. This statement can be connected with a few different circumstances. First, because they are indeed able to do all of the work independently. Second, because they have nobody to help them. This emphasise on their ability to do all of the household chores independently – although they are often unable do it – can be understood as a kind of refusal to admit the problem. This refusal can be psychologically necessary because these widows do not have another choice. This circumstance is more likely to be experienced by old, poor and childless (or abandoned) widows. One of them said, “It is useless to complain since nobody could really help me. I will do the work as much as I can, and Gusti Allah (God) will protect the weak!”

*Assistance in dealing with formal-official affairs*

From the very first moment of her widowhood, a widow is confronted with men’s work’ such as selecting and buying a grave for her deceased husband. Because of the limited possibility of enlargement, many graveyards in urban areas are very crowded. Some of these graveyards are not only occupied by the dead but also by beggars, petty criminals and even lower class prostitutes. Thus, finding a grave and bargaining its price with a male cemetery caretaker is perceived as a difficult task for a woman. This task is usually done by the widow’s male relatives (sons, grandsons, brothers, uncles etc.) or male neighbours. During the funeral, assistance from male relatives is also needed to lead the ceremony since women are not allowed to perform it.

If the widow has the right to receive a pension, she will be helped by her male relatives to apply for it. Bu Alfı (71) told me, “my son had especially come from Irian Jaya (West Papoea) in order to help me to apply a widow’s pension. I got headache if I had to fill the forms. The offices also made me very nervous, it could never be done without my son’s help”. Dartı̊k (38), a widow in Talun market of Semeru alley, was accompanied and assisted by her nephew in submitting an insurance claim (her husband was killed in a car accident). When she put the money in a bank, she was even escorted by the neighbourhood head. Selecting and deciding schools or universities and finding work for the children are also affairs in which assistance from adult male relatives is often needed.

Some widows also have received practical support from their relatives (especially the children) to run and manage the family business. Bu Arifın (58) has a shop and a lodging house in Semeru alley. Two of her daughters-in-law help bu Arifın to run the shop and one of
the sons helps her to manage the lodging house. However, the reciprocity element is very obvious in this case since bu Arifin provides accommodation to the young couples concerned.

There are cases that show how the lack of a reliable male assistant to run the (inherited) business can be an important reason for a widow to stop the business or to remarry. A widow in Semeru alley had to stop selling fried snacks because her sons would not help her. She used to be helped by her husband. In Kemirahan alley, a middle-aged widow decided to remarry because she needed a reliable partner to run her growing furniture business. Some of her neighbours told me, “You know that the furniture business has always been men’s work. She has inherited the furniture workshop from her husband, and she needs to be helped by a reliable man”. When I suggested that the widow could hire a male employee, the neighbour replied, “She had done it before but it did not work. She was deceived by him”. In an interview with the widow, she also mentioned the problem, “My second husband was one of my regular buyers. He also has a furniture workshop. I got a lot of help from him”.

The support providers

More than 70% of the widows mentioned children (including grand children and children in law) as the main providers of practical support. 10% of the widows were mostly assisted by siblings, parents, more distant relatives or by combination of these relatives. 3% were assisted by neighbours or a housemaid. 14% of the widows said that they did not receive any assistance (although some of these widows really needed it). The examination of various types of practical support has shown that different support providers offer different types of support.

These differences are related to some aspects; first, the gender aspect. Some studies demonstrate that there are differences in the kind of support that is provided or expected to be provided by female or male relatives (Lopata, 1987; Finch, 1989; Niehof, 1995 and 1997). It is obvious that daughters (or other female relatives) have more involvement in providing personal care and assistance in doing household chores, and those male relatives are the primary support providers for dealing with formal-official affairs.

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12 Constraints in running an inherited business are not only faced by Javanese widows. In her study on widows in Spain, Os (1997:65-74), described a similar situation. Because of the difficulties to get a reliable (male) employee and the risk to be deceived, a landholder widow often choose to give the land to her children.

13 According to the ‘hierarchy of obligation’, the parents-child relationship is the second port of call (after the marriage relationship) which children being a major source of support for elderly parents (Finch,1987:28)).
According to Niehof (1995:427) working in the formal sector prevents daughters from playing the traditional role of caregiver. This problem is recognisable in a few cases but it is not relevant among the 111 widows I interviewed. Most of the widows’ daughters work in the informal sector14 or do not have paid work at all.

A highly gendered custom like *ikut suami* (following a husband) can also prevent daughters to function as care givers. It is not uncommon that married daughters live far away from their parents because they have to migrate with their husbands. These daughters were not work-seekers themselves, but migrated as wives in a dependent migration (Boyle, 1998:92).

Second, the physical and emotional proximity aspect. According to Finch (1989:28), “People who are members of the same household are also major providers of support [...]a particular child who shares a home with their parents is much likely to be giving personal care than their siblings”. More than half of the widows live with a child and his/her family. The children who stay on are usually expected to take care of the widowed mother. I agree with Niehof (1997:5) that for most cases this is a reciprocal arrangement. Nevertheless, this physical proximity aspect is not only valid for children who stay on. In the case that none of the children can live with the widowed mother, then the obligation can be burdened to those who live nearest the widow.

I am also interested in the background of the decision namely the questions of ‘who will stay on’ or ‘who is chosen to stay on’. Although not all widows explicitly said that they had chosen the emotionally closest child to stay with them, they often admitted that they preferred to be looked after by a child (mostly a daughter) who could understand them better. Thus, the physical proximity aspect (members of the same household as the major care givers) is also intertwined with (or can be strengthened by) the emotional proximity aspect.

The growth of emotional closeness can be stimulated by expectations for the future. Mothers can be more attached emotionally to a particular child (for example: the oldest son) because they realise that her old days security will depend on this child (Lopata, 1987:9; Rodenburg, 1997:190-191). H. Geertz (1961:105-106) wrote about the special relation between a Javanese mother and her youngest child namely, “[...] the youngest child until supplanted is almost always her favourite, if he is the last child, he will remain her favourite throughout life”. However, I encountered cases that showed that the growth of emotional

14 The situation of my research sites should be taken into account in order to understand this phenomenon. None of the research sites is located in an industrial area. On the contrary, they are located near a few big markets therefore many of the inhabitants work in (petty) trading.
proximity between a widowed mother and one of her children is not a fixed pattern from the childhood. In the course of the time, influenced by various factors, the emotional closeness between particular persons can grow stronger. Bu Sunik (71) in Semeru alley had a closer relationship with her daughter Enny (40) since the daughter’s marriage got worse. In that difficult period, Enny often came to her mother for emotional comfort. Those visits she enabled her to provide practical support for her mother, for instance by accompanying her mother for regular check up in the hospital.

Third, the negotiation aspect. The unspecified nature of kinship obligation provides the opportunity for negotiation and bargaining (Niehof, 1997:3), not only between the receiver and the provider, but also among the providers of support themselves. Below, I will illustrate negotiation and bargaining among family members in providing practical support.

In the case of Munah (78), a widow who suffered from a long period of illness, the negotiation among the support providers (the children and grandchildren) often focused on the question of ‘who is doing what’ and ‘who pays how much for Munah’s medical treatment’. One of Munah daughters, who could not contribute money for the medical cost, was the one who did the nursing tasks (especially the most ‘unpopular’ ones such as putting a clean diaper on). The two other children were mostly excused from doing the nursing work for various less relevant reasons. The daughter, who did most of the nursing work, also felt unhappy with the division of tasks but she also said, “I could not complain too much. They had financed the hospitalisation. Thus, I should contribute as much practically as I could, shouldn’t I?”

This case illustrates a situation where the medical care is very expensive, the health insurance is generally absent but the caregivers have a relatively flexible daily schedule for providing personal care. In this situation the higher appreciation for financial support is caused by its scarcity. The circumstance would be different if the medical costs were sufficiently covered by insurance programs but the caregivers’ time to provide personal care is scarce. This scarcity principle is useful in acquiring insight into the (potential) source of conflict in a negotiation and into the power each party has in bargaining.

7. The Access to Family Support

The fact that some widows do receive support and some others do not leads to the issue of ‘access’. The question is: what determines the widow’s access to certain kinds of support? In this section I shall discuss three factors namely, the normative guidelines (for providing
support to family members), the engagement in family relationships and the ability to reciprocate and to perform certain functions.

**The normative guidelines**

This factor brings the issue of values, norms and ideology to the fore. As the starting point, it is useful to look at what H. Geertz (1961:1946 -149) defined as ‘two distinctively Javanese values’ which often have been mentioned in her description of the Javanese family. She also wrote that, ‘[...] general social values provide legitimacy and meaning to familial institutions and serve as normative guides for the daily give-and-take among family members’

The first value is respect (*urmat*). According to H. Geertz (1961:147) this value, ‘[...] is based on traditional Javanese view that all social relationships are hierarchically ordered, and on the moral imperative to maintain and express this mode of social order as good in itself. [...] the traditional view persists that all men are socially unequal, and the customary etiquette patterns are still followed for all relationship of any sort between inferior and superior. The diffuse claims for protection, gifts and help in trouble that an inferior can make on his superior, and their reverse, the diffuse respect and loyalty that a superior can ask from an inferior, serve to bind together people who may, in a completely changing society, have sharply opposed interests. Preservation of the forms of etiquette thus operates to stabilize and solidify social relationships of every sort, and serves as strong integrative force in Javanese society’.

The hierarchical elements are also evident in Javanese familial relationships both among the members of the extended as well as the nuclear family. Therefore, claims, obligations and reciprocity in support-relationships among family members are also strongly influenced by this etiquette of respect.

The second value is *rukun* which underlines ‘[...] the maintenance of the appearance if not the substance of “social harmony,” for the sake of inner psychic equilibrium’ (H.Geertz, 1961:148). It is also stated by H. Geertz (1961:149-150) that ‘Within the sphere of kinship the *rukun* value is a central elements. It is held up as an ideal for all relationships, from those between siblings to those between distant cousins [...] Striving after *rukun* is often the main motivation for helping a relative in time of trouble in spite of mutual distrust and personal selfishness’

In the interviews, the widows frequently used terms such as *urmat* (respect), *bekti* (devoted) or *rukun* (harmonious) in describing the flows of support and to show different quality of relationships among their family members. For example, in order to express her
pride and satisfaction on the adequate support provided by her children, a widow told me that these children are very **rukun** in supporting their mother. In an evening chat, a woman in Semeru alley told me that the third daughter of her widowed neighbour was not a **bekti** (devoted) child, since she preferred to spend her salary on new clothes rather than to help her mother in paying the household’s monthly costs.

It is true that the values of *urmat* and *rukun* cannot assure the actual flow of support. Moreover such values are subject to change themselves. However, they should not be overlooked because people still refer to them. These values can function as guidelines to the proper things to do in family relation in general and in support-relations among family members in particular. Therefore, some widows also expressed their financial dependency on their children in a proud tone. The fact that these widows could depend on the children (that is, the children provide sufficient support for them) suggested the children’s respect and devotion for them. It was obvious that the deference to these values can lead to admiration and that negligence of them can stimulate gossip.

The effectiveness of these values is also determined by individual and social context. Let us return to the case of a daughter who was perceived by her neighbour as not **bekti** (devoted) to her widowed mother. A bad relationship between the girl and the mother can lead to the negligence of the *urmat* and *bekti* values. The neighbourly gossip about her unwillingness to assist her mother financially might annoy the girl but it would not seriously damage her entire social life since she had other parts of it outside the neighbourhood. The urban neighbourhood where she lives is not inhabited by a closed community that can be threatening in its evaluation of its members, especially also because there was no serious disapproval from her own family.

In other words, without exaggerating them, the values of *urmat*, *bekti* and *rukun* can make family support more accessible for the widows because they encourage support relations. This encouragement, however, operates in its most effective form at the individual level.

*The engagement in kin relationship*

This factor can be easily perceived as self-evident, since people are usually involved in familial relationships from the cradle to the grave. Widows who (completely) do not engage in kin relationship usually live under severe circumstances, especially if they are old and not able to generate independent income any longer. These widowed women are not always childless or an only child. They have relatives, but they do not engage in familial relationships
with those relatives. The relationships have been badly deteriorating for a very long time and there is no possibility of mending them.

These widows do not receive family support at all. Mbah Nah (65) was one of them. She lived in a wooden house in the local market of Semeru alley. She was childless but she had a brother in the village of origin. When I asked about her brother she replied, “I do not know whether he is still alive or not. That is my past, I closed the book long time ago”. At the time I met her for the interviews (1997-1998), mbah Nah was still able to work and to take care of herself independently. I asked her carefully how she would manage if she got ill, her answer was, “Get ill? Oh no, it won’t happen to me”. But she got ill one day and could not work for several days. “I use my small savings to buy my food these days. It is all right, I will get better soon”. But mbah Nah had died a few months before I came back to the field in July 1999. According to her closest neighbours, none of mbah Nah’s relatives came during her last illness. Even her funeral had to be arranged by her neighbours.

Mbah Nah’s life story shows that having relatives is not as having a familial relationship. It is true that being involved in familial relationships is not a guarantee of entitlement to family support, since, as I discussed before, family relationships are fluid and continuously adjusted by the parties involved. Nevertheless, the widows must engage in family relationships in order to gain support from their family members.

**The ability to reciprocate and to perform certain functions**

Since the support-relation is fluid, continuously adjusted and negotiated, being on the receiving end of this relationship is insecure. Regarding this insecurity, some widows tried to explain their position within the support relation in an ambiguous way. On the one hand they are proud that their children have sufficiently supported them because it means that these children love her and are economically better off. On the other hand, these widows also emphasise that they are *tidak bisa diam* (always doing something), which suggests that they contribute their labour in doing the household chores. Sometimes they also underlined the importance of their contribution by describing the close relationship between them and the grandchildren such as “My granddaughter won’t eat if she is not fed by me”.

Semi (65), a widow from Kemirahan alley, moved out from her daughter’s house because she could not help her daughter to take care of the grandchildren. “Taking care of my grandchildren was too exhausting and very time consuming. At that time I had to stop my work as masseuse, thus, I had no independent income. My daughter had asked me to live with
her because she needed my help, so when I could not help her, I felt less accepted at her house”.

This case illustrates the importance of the ability to reciprocate and to perform certain functions in the support relation. Esterman and Andrews' research (1991:286) demonstrates that elderly people who have more involvement in child minding and decision-making receive relatively more financial support.

The ability to reciprocate is not only related to the contribution of labour since ownership of a house or entitlement to a steady income (a widow pension) can also be used as a means to reciprocate. As argued by Hetler (1990:193) ‘property may be given as inheritance at any time and property owner may choose to give away assets to kin before they die, often as a means of securing the provision of care for themselves in old age’.

The widows’ ability to reciprocate and to perform certain functions is another factor that can make family support more accessible to them. The gloomy side of it is that those who have less also receive less support. The desperate case, described before of old and poor widows who died alone is an example of this. However it is not my intention to understand the reciprocal element of the support-relation only as a form of ‘balanced’ reciprocity, since familial support can also be found in a ‘one-way flow’ or in ‘generalised’ reciprocity (see also Sahlins, 1996).

This takes us back to the complexity and fluidity of support relations. Different factors can be underlined in order to clarify the widows’ access to family support, and no single picture can be drawn.

8. In the Absence of Family Support

Many studies of family support have examined various aspects, which can show the complexity of support relationships among relatives. However, a quite similar picture can also be seen when people primarily engage in support relationships with their family members, especially the first-degree relatives (Finch, 1989, Hashimoto et al, 1992, Knodel et al, 1992; Brink, 1999). The data I obtained on family support among widows and their families also have demonstrated a comparable phenomenon.

Support relationships among family members have a paradoxical character. On one hand, family ties do not automatically make people help each other. By highlighting the various forms of negotiation and adjustment, I attempt to emphasise the fact that support relationships have a more complicated foundation than moral values and affection. On the
other hand, the majority of the widows mentioned their relatives, especially the adult children, as the prime support providers. The table below shows this.

Table 4.1: Different support providers mentioned by the widows (%) (N widows = 111)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The support providers</th>
<th>Economic support</th>
<th>Emotional support</th>
<th>Practical support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children/grandchild.</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>59.5</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siblings</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combination *</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In laws</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighbours</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>17**</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Servant</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* This is mainly the combination of parents and siblings.

** Neighbours are often mentioned as confidants in combination with relatives who live in the same neighbourhood.

In this section I shall analyse the important role of family members, especially the adult children, as support providers. I am aware that family support should not be reduced to the parent – child support relation only. Nevertheless, the fact that adult children have been mentioned prominently as support providers is also worthwhile for a special examination. Further, the important role of children as support providers will be analysed by focusing on the opposite extreme, namely, on the situation where children are absent. If adult children are the prime support providers for widows, what happens to widows who are childless? Which widows have suffered most from the absence of family support (especially support which is supposedly rendered by the children)? How do they cope with the problem? What kinds of support are accessible for them? Before I describe some portraits of childless widows and analyse the problems caused by their childlessness, I will discuss a few aspects of parent-child support relationships, which can put the prime role of children as support provider in a more relative position.
Parent – child support relationships

The idea of the special bond between parents and their children is commonly accepted; and even romanticised. An important facet of this special bond is the right and duty of helping each other. This is also valid for the Javanese families in general (H. Geertz, 1961:26). Therefore, the prominent role of children as support providers, in this case for their widowed mothers shown by the table above, is not surprising. Support that flows between parents and children is not only from the younger to the older generation. It is often underlined that the support that flows – especially in the form of wealth flow such as inheritance - from parents to their children is even more prevalent (Finch, 1989:17-20; Schröder-Butterfill, 2000). Here and there throughout this chapter, I have mentioned the cases of supporting widows. These widows are often the household head and the important provider of economic support for their family, including their married children. These two ways support flows between parents and their children are also parallel with the issue of the changeability of role in a support relation throughout different life courses (see section two above). Concerning this, I would like to emphasise that the dominant role of children as support providers does not represent the whole picture of parent-child support relations. It should be understood within the life course context. We should be aware of the bias related to the widows’ average age, and thus, their life stage. If we look at the young widows (below 40 years) – those who are only a minority (2.7%) within the research population - the direction of the support flows will obviously be from parents to children.

Another important issue is the reliability and sufficiency of the support rendered. In general, support relationships have both a supposed/normative and an actual side. Although these sides are usually connected to each other, they are still two different sides. Reliability of family support relates to the supposed side of the relation. According to Finch (1989:233), ‘[…] the real importance of family support in practice seems to be its reliability: not that it is being used constantly, but you know that you always can fall back on it’. The widows’ acknowledgement of the main role of children as support providers may reflect the widows’ notion that their children are those whom they can always ask for support. It may also reflect the higher frequency of support rendered by the children. To what extent is the rendered support sufficient?

In the analysis of support relationship within the crisis period (chapter nine) I argue that almost 60% of the widows in Semeru and Kacangan alleys stated that they received economic support from their children, but only 26% could entirely depend on this support. In other words, in many cases the (economic) support rendered is insufficient. If sufficiency is
perceived as belonging to the actual side of support, a gap between the normative side (reliability) and the actual side (sufficiency) will regularly appear. The insufficiency can be caused by various problems, for instance a lack of support means at the providing end. Poor children cannot provide a sufficient economic support to their widowed mother although there is a willingness to do so. In this situation, the duty is not denied but the capacity to perform is lacking. How then, should the important role of a certain support provider, in this case family members and especially children, be understood in relation to this gap? There are always two sides of the support coin, which have to be taken into account. The (important) role of any support provider will always be swinging between the desiderata and the realities.

Portraits of childless widows: who are they?
Almost 11% of the widows (12 out 111 persons) are childless or do not have any living child. In this section, five childless widows will be described more elaborately in order to stress the diverse circumstances of childlessness among the widows. I shall refer these five childless widows in the examination of childlessness problem in the following section. But first, the childless widows and the research population will be compared according to several personal features (age, residential arrangement, income earning activity, house ownership).

Table 4.1: Personal features of the childless widows and the research population (%).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal features</th>
<th>The childless widows (N=12)</th>
<th>The research population (N=111)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average age</td>
<td>69.5</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential arrangement:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living alone</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living with children *</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living with other relatives **</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living with tenants</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income earning activities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Still working</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>34.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pensioner</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not engaged in a paid work ***</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>37.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House ownership</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owner of the house</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>85.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Note:

*) Both the biological as well as the adopted children (in the first column) including their spouses and children

**) Especially siblings and parents

***) Most of them have to depend (either entirely or partly) on economic support from different providers. A few of them can raise a small income by renting rooms in their houses.

The average age of the childless widows is obviously higher than the average age of the research population. Commonly, this is associated with the problems of physical inability, ill health and therefore the higher need for personal care. It becomes more relevant to examine these problems further when they are also connected with the fact that the percentage of childless widows who are living alone is much higher than that of the research population. In the comparison based on the income earning activity and house ownership, the childless widows and the research population show a similar pattern. In other words, the childless widows’ access to economic resources is comparable to the research population as a whole.

The five childless widows have similarities as well as differences. All of them are of advanced age and have health problems either permanently or periodically. But they differ in their economic position and in their engagement in various social relationships.

The first childless widow is Niti (more than 70 years). She was a pensioner who lived in a house inhabited by four households. She had inherited the half of the house but she decided to share it with two of her nieces. These nieces were acknowledged as Niti’s daughters. As a pensioner, Niti had a sufficient and independent income. Most of the time Niti could perform all of the household chores including doing her own laundry. But if she got ill, the two nieces would assist her. When Niti died in 1998 because of a heart attack, the two nieces were responsible (both financially as well as practically) for her funeral. However they also inherited the part of the house, which was entitled to Niti. What I like to stress here is the fact that Niti not only created parent-child relationship with her two nieces but also invited the adopted daughters to live in her (part of the) house. This means Niti was more or less assured of old age care.

Another childless widow, Juari (67), has a different circumstance although she also maintains a parent-child relation with one of her nephews. Before she got a stroke attack at the end of 1998, Juari was a rujak (a kind of fruit salad) seller. She lives alone in a house at the Semeru alley. The adopted son and his family live in their own house in another part of the city. Juari has good relationships with several next-door neighbours. Every time Juari got
ill, these female neighbours called the adopted son, brought her to a doctor, regularly dropped in and brought meals for her. If the illness became serious, Juari would be taken into the adopted son’s house for a few weeks. Since the end of 1998 Juari has not been able to work any longer, however, she does not experience a serious financial problem because she can draw on her savings. As opposed to Niti, Juari depends more on her close neighbours for day-to-day assistance and comfort. The adopted son only plays an important role as a carer when intensive and durable support is needed. However not all of the efforts to solve childlessness through adoption are successful. The circumstance of Sarah (82), the third childless widow described here, shows how adoption is no guarantee for affection and care in the old age.

Sarah is one of the oldest inhabitants of Semeru alley. She rents out a few rooms of her house for her monthly income, however according to a few neighbours Sarah also generates an additional income as a moneylender. Sarah was a quite successful merchant of jewellery and cloths. She had a much larger income than her husband who worked as a driver. As the main breadwinner and a woman who had her own sufficient and independent income, Sarah used to have an important role in the decision making process among her household members. She had taken care of her old parents, her ill sister and her husband until their death. She adopted one of her nieces but her relation with the adopted daughter has been broken for many years. They had a big conflict because Sarah did not like the daughter’s future husband. During the last few years, Sarah suffered from rheumatism. Sometimes she could not walk for days because of the severe pain in her legs. During this kind of difficult period, Sarah was usually helped both economically as well as practically by a next-door neighbour. This neighbour is Sarah’s best friend and confidant. One of her nephews has suggested selling her house and moving into his house, but Sarah does not like the idea of being a dependent member of her nephew’s household. It is worthy to note that, like Juari, Sarah also receives daily assistance from one of her next-door neighbours. This person is a widow herself and Sarah’s best friend for many years. The conflicitive relationship with her adopted daughter makes Sarah reluctantly accept her nephew’s offer to live with him. According to Sarah as long as she can take care herself independently she prefers to live in her own house. The desire to live independently is also explicitly stressed by another childless widow, Prapti (more that 70 years). She also said that she never wanted to solve her childlessness by an adoption.

Prapti lives alone in a beautiful old house, which is located at one of the big streets in Malang. Her husband was a vice-director of a regional bank; therefore she is entitled to a
good widow’s pension. Prapti has devoted much of her time to a local women’s organisation. She had led the organisation for many years before she decided to resign and to function only as an informal advisor. During the last couple of years, Prapti has suffered from some health problems. Although most of the time she is still able to take care herself, she begun to think about the problems she will encounter when her health problems become worse. Prapti tried to hire a servant, but all of the candidates gave up their job after only a few weeks. Prapti thought that she was too disciplinarian for those young girls. In 1999, she attempted to sell her house to one of her nephews and nieces for a much lower price than it should be, on condition that the buyer should accommodate her in that house until her death. None of her relatives were interested in her offer. In August 2001, Prapti still lived alone in her beautiful big house. In our last interview she said that money could not always buy a good servant. She also realised that her well-off relatives did not want to be burdened with old-age care for her, even though this burden would be compensated with an economic advantage. It is obvious that in Prapti’s circumstances, wealth cannot be converted into (practical) support. To return to the case of Niti, her assets are one of the important factors in the reciprocal relationships with her adopted daughters. An example of a severe circumstance of childlessness in old age among the widows is Nah’s (64) experience. In this example, childlessness in old age is made worse by ill health and poverty.

Nah lived alone in a one room wooden house at the local market of Semeru alley. Although she had relatives, including her own brother, in her village of origin, she did not make any contact with them. According to her, the family relationship was a closed book, and it belonged to the past. Nah was also a person who did not want to engage in a close neighbourly relationship. Her next-door neighbour called her a ‘stiff person’. Nah’s main daily activity was selling vegetables. However, her income from this activity was very low. It was barely enough to cover her daily expenditures and the house rent. Since the petty trading was her only income-generating activity, whenever she got ill, she had to with draw from her savings. In early 1999, Nah died alone after having been ill for almost two weeks. Her neighbours who were curious why Nah did not open her window and door as usual found her body the following day. Nah’s funeral was organised by her neighbours and none of her relatives came for it.

As mentioned before, the five widows are similarly in an old age and having health problems (either permanently or periodically). But they are different in their economic position and the way they establish and maintain various social relationships. As pensioners and the owner of their houses, Prapti and Niti both have access to a sufficient, independent
and stable income as well as to the valuable assets namely their houses. Juari and Sarah also own a house but they do not have a good monthly income as the pensioners do. Juari and Sarah can expend their savings, but these are not unlimited. Nah experiences the most severe economic situation since she had neither a valuable asset nor a sufficient and stable income.

Concerning their engagement in various social relationships, Niti, Prapti, Juari, and Sarah are examples of those who are able and willing to maintain the relationships with some (distant) relatives, neighbours and friends. Because of their co-residency, her relatives closely and permanently surrounded Niti. Juari and Sarah do not live together with their relatives but they can stay at their relatives’ house or invite the relatives to stay in their own house, whenever they need to be nursed during a period of illness. Apart from that, Juari and Sarah also have a good relationship with their next-door neighbours who also can also help and confide in them. Nah is a case where social relationships, familial as well as neighbourly, have deteriorated and therefore only limited amount of help is provided for her.

The fact that almost half of the childless widows have adopted children is noteworthy. Niti, Juari and Sarah are the examples of this. However, the invented parent–child bond does not always end positively. I shall come back to this issue in the discussion of the coping efforts.

Problems of childlessness

Various problems experienced by the childless widows can be placed into similar categories as those of other widows namely, the economic, emotional, and practical problems. However, children as the prime support-providers for the research population in general, are missing from the problem-solving scenario. In what ways then, are the problems of the childless widows different from those of widows who have children?

Economic insecurity is a general problem for the elderly who are not able to work any longer, do not possess valuable assets to be expended and are not entitled to any social insurance or assistance. Generally, the closest relatives especially children are those who provide economic support for coping with the daily problems. Therefore, it is conceivable that for the most of widows the various forms of economic back up are among others the ways to deal with their economic insecurities. The more distant relatives and neighbours usually do not render the economic support on a day-to-day basis such as the uang jajan (pocket money) and the uang bulanan (monthly money). They do, however, provide economic assistance related to special circumstances such as funeral, hospitalisation, selamatan (ritual feast),
wedding etc. Therefore the absence of children and closest relatives can be connected with the absence of the day-to-day economic support. Most of the childless widows indeed do not receive the uang jajan or the uang bulanan, although some of them, such as Nah, really need it.

Sarah and Juari's neighbours might bring meals, as a combined form of economic and practical support, for the widows if they were ill and could not cook for themselves. When they got better, the assistance would cease. Previous sections demonstrate that family support is not always sufficient and constantly rendered. However, the longer-term (economic) support is commonly given by the closest family members, not by the distant relatives, neighbours or the state. This is the point where the reliability, and therefore the importance, of family support by closest relatives can be underlined.

As the widows who are elderly are also struggling with health problems, their need for practical – instrumental support especially personal care is also obvious. In the case of Niti the care is fully given by the adopted daughters who live in the same house. Most of the research population receive personal care from their children, especially daughters. The role of neighbours in providing personal care can be seen in the case of Juari and Sarah. But the personal care offered by neighbours only includes minor nursing tasks. Neighbours and distant relatives are not usually expected to perform intensive and long-term nursing tasks. The widows often told me that they did not even expect that their daughters in law would nurse them in these ways. Consequently, they preferred to reside with their own daughters. There is no case where neighbours helped a sick widow in cleaning herself, dressing or going to the toilet. Although in this situation the widow can ask her neighbours to do shopping (titip belanja) for her (see chapter 5).

I found cases outside the research sites that can show what happen to old childless widows who are very ill and have to be nursed intensively. One of these cases was an old widow who lived in a kampong in Salatiga (East Java). The old widow could not walk any longer. She had to be nursed permanently. None of the widows’ relatives could be approached for the nursing responsibility; therefore, the neighbours especially represented by the neighbourhood head decided to inform the regional dinas sosial (the social affairs office) about the problem. A few days later, several men from the dinas sosial came to take the widow to a panti jompo (elderly home). The old widow, who was not informed that she

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15 Only 29% from the widows are entitled to a pension. Nevertheless, this percentage will be much lower in a rural setting.
would be taken into an elderly home, tried to refuse the removal and cried. It was a quite sad situation for everybody but there was a unanimous idea among the neighbours that they should not be burdened too long with the intensive nursing tasks. One of them said, “None of us can be expected to clean up her excrement”.

It would be too simple to presume that children will perform intensive nursing tasks voluntarily. It is shown in the previous sections how the obligation to support their parents is continuously negotiated among the children themselves. The negotiation can even end in a conflict or raise tension and jealousy. However, socially, children will be much more constrained to send their sick parents to an elderly home than neighbours.

Coping with the absence of children

The cases above illustrate two coping actions, first, converting economic resources (income, assets, savings) into support and second, drawing upon various social relationships including those which are based on charity. It is important to note that, in practice, these two coping actions are not mutually exclusive and are not equally accessible for everyone. The analysis of these efforts will be focussed on the question: who has the access to which effort and to what extent can the effort solve the problems?

Wealth transfer from parents to children can be understood from different perspectives. Finch (1989) discussed the wealth transfers from parents to their children (including inheritance) as an economic support from the older to the younger generation. In this perspective, parents are especially seen as the support providers and less as the future support receivers. But, giving away assets to the (younger) kin members is also known as one of the means to secure old age care (Helter, 1990). Regardless the problem of potentiality of support, in this perspective, parents or the older kin members are more positioned as the future support receivers. The first coping effort, namely converting economic resources into support belongs to the latter perspective, since the transfer of wealth is meant to be reciprocated in the future.

The childless widows also transfer their wealth to their kin members in various manners. In the most cases, the transfers are done gradually in the long term and parallel with an adoption (the case of Niti and Juari). The transfers can also take place in a more drastic way. A childless widow in Kacangan alley sold her house, invested the money for improving her sister’s house into a two storey building and lives in one of the rooms on the second floor.
In this case, the investment results in an entitlement to a co-residence and a more secured old age care. Prapti also made a similar attempt by offering her beautiful house for a much lower price (than the market price) to her relatives and asking the buyer to provide her a room in that house until her death. The fact that none of the relatives were interested in this offer is noteworthy. In this case, the wealth transfer is not interesting enough for the potential support providers to be exchanged with the responsibility to provide an intensive old age care. It is not my intention to reduce support relations into a strict economic calculation, but the balance between ‘what will be received’ and ‘what should be given’ can be very important especially for those who are less obliged to support.

Converting economic resources into support is an effort that is in the first instance only accessible for those who have the resources. However, since there is an element of exchange in the conversion, it requires two parties who should agree upon their rights and obligations. Although it rarely happens, a wealth transfer can be refused and fail to establish a support relationship.

A childless widow in a severe economic situation like Nah is totally excluded from securing her old age care. This case is made more tragic by the deteriorated family ties and neighbourly relations. A few other childless widows who had a similar situation are still able to draw upon neighbourly relations and charity to obtain daily economic support in the form of meals and small credits at the local shops. Apart from the stigma of being ‘stiff’ toward her neighbours, Nah lived in a social environment where charity is a luxury. Most of Nah’s neighbours are economically not much better off. In the interviews with other inhabitants of this neighbourhood the picture of ‘people are only busy with their own stomach’ was often drawn.

9. Concluding Remarks

There are various forms of family support that can be gained by widows in order to cope with economic, emotional and practical problems. According to its purpose economic support can be divided into daily support and support for special circumstances. The economic support can be given in the form of money transfer (gift, loan, payment), gift in kind and accommodation. The practical-instrumental support is usually provided in the form of personal care, assistance in doing household chores, child-care, assistance in running a business and assistance in dealing with formal-official affairs. Compared with the two
previous forms of support, emotional support is less visible. In general, Javanese tend to restrain their emotional expressions including those roused by a death. Consequently, emotional support can be provided in the less intensive way such as the day-to-day chat.

In all kinds of family support (economic, emotional, practical-instrumental), the major support providers are the widows’ children. The explanation of this can be drawn especially from the fact that in most cases the parents-child bond is the strongest and most stable one. Therefore, in the case of childlessness, adoption is commonly perceived as the best solution. But in the absence of children (including adopted children), widows are usually helped by the siblings or the more distant relatives (nieces, nephews etc). The role of parents as support providers is mainly relevant for the young widows.

The degree and the quality of relationship between receivers and providers of support are not the most important factor in understanding who provides what kind of support, since gender, socio-economic position and life course (both of the providers as well as the receivers) are also very relevant factors.

Support relations among family members are subject to change. Generally, the giving and receiving of support is interwoven with other aspects of people’s life. Changes in life stage, life style or health state, for examples, can influence the ability to provide or the need for (particular kind of) support. At this point, it is important to devote attention to the fluidity and negotiability of a support relation. Nevertheless, in support relations among family members the negotiation and adjustment can be a delicate matter because of the affective element of the relationship.

Although some factors such as the existence of some norms about right and duty, the degree of involvement in kin relationships and the ability to reciprocate and to perform certain functions, can stimulate the flow of support or can make the support more accessible for the widows, it is also true that the widows do not have equal access to family support. The presence of family support for widows as a kind of safety net cannot be denied, but to what extent the net will catch them in periods of hardship depends on various factors. In other words, the safety net is precarious.