Surviving Spouses: Support for Widows in Malang, East Java
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Chapter 9
COMPLEXITY AND HIERARCHY
Concluding Remarks

This chapter aims to provide a reflection upon the previous chapters. Firstly I would like to go back to the fundamental idea of this study that people gain, receive and provide support in order to cope with problems and situations of distress. The book is introduced by a demonstration of one of the widely shared problems in Indonesia namely the lack of protection by social insurance and assistance. This protection is exclusive to the ‘happy few’ and, considering the socio-economic and political turbulences in the country, its alleviation is not yet in sight. Nevertheless, as I wrote before, it would be too simple to conclude that this ‘unprotected’ majority are defenceless against insecurities and hardships. This study is an effort to record and examine numerous and various efforts to overcome insecurities and to win hardships by gaining, receiving and providing support. In the preceding chapters, I have invited the readers to view how support arrangements for widows operate, why they operate in that way, and to understand the details. This examination showed that almost every aspect of support and support relations implies diverse and interrelated categories, circumstances and stages. This diversity and interrelation are crucial in understanding support and support relationship, but they do not represent the complete story. In this last chapter, I shall highlight patterns in these diversity and interrelation that can bring complexity and hierarchy in the support landscape to the fore.

1. The Complex Landscape of Support

The complexity of the support landscape can be traced from several aspects namely, the support receivers (who reflect the problem that have to be cope with), the support providers, the support flows and the support relations. These aspects are indispensable elements of support arrangements. None of the support arrangements can be understood without knowledge of who gains, receives and provides the support, how it happens, and how it is created and maintained. In this section I will briefly review these aspects.
The support receivers and the problems to be coped with

As I discussed before, in Java, widowhood does not place women in a clear cut distinct socio-economic and cultural position. Many problems pertaining to widowhood are comparable to those caused by other marriage dissolutions such as divorce or abandonment. In many respects, widows’ problems are also similar to those faced by women who have never married. For all of the spouseless categories (widows, divorcee, abandoned women, spinster), the threat of economic deprivation is made greater by the unequal access to various familial and neighbourly helping relationships and the almost complete lack of protection by state supervised social security. Many of the practical problems that are experienced by widows, are also no different to those faced by divorced, abandoned or never married women. One of the basic problems is the absence of a male partner to represent the household in the male dominated (public) domains and to perform the tasks which are perceived as men’s work. However, if a woman is capable of performing these tasks, she can do it regardless of the reason for a husband’s absence. Thus, a widow or a divorcee can start a new business, be a member of an organisation, be the household head etc. Older widows and divorcees will also have comparable need for old age care. It does not really matter whether one has an aged widowed or divorced mother, normatively, the obligation to provide old age care is the same. How and to what extent the care will be provided is not determined by the mother’s widowhood or divorced state but by other factors like the quality of relationships, the availability of resources, geographical distance etc. In other words, Javanese women do not fall into specific circumstance of deprivation and marginalisation because of widowhood as such.

Without a clear cut distinct position, widows in (urban) Java are heterogeneous. Apart from the fact that all of them have lost their spouse through death and have not remarried, these widowed women cannot be placed into a single picture. Parallel with this heterogeneity, the problems pertaining to widowhood are also very diverse and entangled. Moreover, these problems are influenced by individual as well as structural factors that shape how and to what extent a woman will be affected by her widowhood.

In chapter three, I discuss various culturally constructed images of widows that reflect the shared ideas about widows and widowhood. Here, gender differentiation and gender relations in that particular context are very relevant. In the context where women’s chastity is highly valued and female sexuality is controlled more strictly than male sexuality, widows
usually have to undergo mourning customs that imply the element of isolation. This element functions as a kind of social control and pressure for widows to maintain a chaste life. In Java, the binary opposition between men’s/public and women’s/private domain, which is strongly connected to gender differentiation, is far from being rigid. Parallel to this, gender relationships are also less repressive for women. This explains the fact that Javanese widows are neither socially excluded nor obliged to undergo strict mourning customs. They can function ‘normally’ (perform the household tasks, go shopping, engage in social activities such as attending a neighbourhood meeting etc.) whenever they are emotionally able to do so, they can inherit both as a daughter as well as a widow, commonly they do not (permanently) reside at their parents-in-law’s house and they can work or continue to work in their widowhood.

Remarriage for widows is socially acceptable. However, it is not uncommon for young and marriageable widows to have suffered more from neighbourly gossip or conflicts that are triggered by jealousy and suspicion for promiscuity. Although there is no prohibition on these young widows starting a new relationship with a man, in some cases neighbours interfered with the widows’ personal affairs on behalf of the neighbourhood’s harmony. The possibility of remarriage can also incite various interferences by the family and neighbours on the widows’ choice either to remarry or not. Nevertheless, in Java this kind of problem is much less intense than in other cultural and religious contexts such as in India, Spain, and Algeria etc. In Java, the familial and neighbourly control and interference are not uncommon, but they do not automatically happen to every young widow.

Economic independence also plays a crucial role in shaping widowhood problems. Losing a husband by death is often associated with the loss of income, either partly or entirely. Although this is true in many cases, to what extent the death of the husbands has impaired the widows’ economic position is influenced by many factors. The widows’ economic independence before the widowhood are varied and unfixed. The most severe income loss is commonly that faced by widows who depend entirely on their husbands’ income, especially if they also have limited resources and capability to generate income independently after their husbands die. Some widows have their own substantial income since before the widowhood. There are cases where wives successfully create new income as a response to the income loss that is caused by their husbands’ ill health. For these women, the death of the husbands barely damages their economic position. Moreover, in Java, widows’ access to the family assets is relatively well protected by the inheritance laws. Widows can
inherit both as daughters as well as wives. These rights are one of the important foundations of a better bargaining position for the Javanese widows.

As mentioned before, the death of a husband often goes together with income loss either partly or entirely; therefore widowhood is often associated with economic deprivation. Although not all widows have to face economic hardships, there are widows who have to start finding an income after their husband died. This effort will not only be affected by the widows’ personal circumstance such as her age, health state etc. but also by the wider economic context. Considering the recent situation in Indonesia, the multiple crises become the most important socio-economic context that adds problems to those who try to survive economically. High inflation has decreased the real value of the available money while the labour market has become more competitive and therefore generating additional income is also more difficult to be done. Within this harsh socio-economic context, income loss - as one of widowhood problems - will be more intense.

In the countries where welfare programmes are more or less developed, the socio-economic deprivation of widowhood can be limited by diverse forms of social assistance, such as retirement pension and health insurance. Commonly, a widow’s pension is not large. But this stable monthly income can promote self-esteem and self-reliance among widows who receive it. Nevertheless, facts from many developing countries demonstrate that a widow’s pension is seldom accessible for every widow. In Indonesia, widow’s pensions and health insurance are not a social assistance but a social insurance that is limited to a few professions. Consequently, the widows who are entitled to the pension are those who married a member of the armed forces or a civil servant. These are a small group of widows who often cannot be seen as the poorest ones. Since the majority of the widows are excluded from the widow’s pension scheme, they have to cope with various problems – especially economic deprivation - without any social protection from the state. In this context, the lack of welfare programmes

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1 I interviewed a few women who became a widowed during the worst part of the economic crisis in the beginning of 1998. These widows had to hold series of selamatans (ceremonies for the deceased husbands) with expenses that were almost three times higher than before the crisis. Beside this sudden and larger financial burden for the ceremonies, the high inflation during the economic crisis also reduced the real value of the economic supports that were received by the widows. Commonly, when somebody died, people give economic support either in the form of cash or staple food. Since the prices of staple food had increased remarkably, many of the attendants preferred to give economic support in cash which is about Rp 2000 – Rp 5000 per person. This amount of money was quite common before the crisis and was equal to 1.5 – 4 kg of rice. But in the beginning of 1998 this amount was equal to less than 2 kg of rice. Thus, in this example, the problem of income loss was also made worse by the support loss.
to deal with problems pertaining to widowhood is in itself a source of problems for the majority of Indonesian widows.

Health state is a crucial factor that shapes widowhood problems. The previous chapter demonstrated that old age, bad health and the need for care are often inseparable. These problems are not attached to widowhood as such, but widowed persons cannot rely on their spouses for the care as couples can. Many of the widows themselves were the main care providers for their sick husbands or their parents. Now, these widows have to depend primarily on their children for the (old age) care. The fact that neighbours and distant relatives do not usually perform the major nursing tasks can emphasise how problematic the situation of old and childless widows is when they get ill. However, the extent of practical problems such as old age care for the elderly widows (or child care for the young widows) does not only depend on the widows’ family composition (the availability of close relatives to take care). It is also influenced by a few other factors such as the way neighbourly relationships are practiced (in the neighbourhood where the widows live), the widows’ economic position, and the migration pattern in the family.

A few problems pertaining to widowhood relate to demographical processes such as migration and fertility decline (especially the problem of childlessness). The migration of children or other close family members can be a source of problems for widows. The widowed mothers who are left behind have to confront the fact that none of the adult children can assist and take care of them. If the widows follow their children (to the city), they of have to adjust in the new environment and in their position as a dependent member. It is worthy to note that to be left behind alone by the migrating children is not an acute problem for most of the widows I interviewed. About 90% of them have one or more children who live in the city. Many of the widows even live in the same neighbourhood with their children. This situation can be quite different in a rural area. The tendency to migrate among the younger generation is perceivably stronger in rural area because of the limited occupational and educational possibilities in the villages.

As spouse and children are commonly considered as the prime support providers, childless widows are deprived of both. Among the research population of this study only a small number of widows (11%) are childless. A few of them have suffered severely since their widowhood and childlessness are made worse by poverty and ill health in old age. For

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2 The widows’ children who have migrated outside the city usually live and work in other bigger cities. Thus, their migration pattern is urban to urban.
these destitute widows, one of the most serious problems is being seriously ill but having nobody to help both practically as well as financially. In Java, the problem of childlessness is commonly solved by (informal) adoption. This arrangement is not, however, always affordable and accessible for everybody. Many of rights and duties that are implied in this arrangement have the character of a balanced reciprocity. A poor widow who does not own properties to be passed over in the form of inheritance is less likely to adopt a child in order to secure the old age care. Moreover, the Javanese also prefer to adopt their own relatives' child. Consequently, the engagement in familial relationships is important for creating the possibility of an adoption.

The support providers

The different categories of support providers also contribute to the complexity of the support landscape. In this book, the support providers are divided into three categories namely family members, neighbours (both at individual as well as at communal level) and the state (those that are connected with social insurance and assistance). Nevertheless, the way the providers of support are categorized often depends on the context. For instance, family members can also be differentiated further between the nuclear family and the extended family. Although living in a nuclear family is not uncommon in Java, this distinction is less relevant for understanding the support flows and support relationships in Java. This is especially true when we analyse a specific social category like widows. Support among the members of a nuclear family is primarily performed by the spouse and to a lesser degree by the dependent child(ren), because of their circumstances namely, being spouse-less and having an 'empty nest', most of the widows have to gain support from outside the nuclear family. Therefore, it is necessary to emphasise the inseparability of the nuclear family from other relatives as the providers of family support. What counts most is the family ties, including the quasi one such as in the case of adoption, and not the residential arrangement.

In general, children are the most important providers of family support for widows. This is quite predictable since the parent-child bond is commonly the strongest and most stable one. In the absence of children, for instance because of childlessness, adoption is often seen as a desirable solution. If this is not the case, the responsibility to help will fall to the

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3 In Brink's (1999) book on care in the Netherlands for instance, care givers are differentiated into three groups, first, the members of the nuclear family (zorg in gezinsverband), second, family members outside the nuclear family, neighbours, friends, colleagues (informele zorg), and third, the professionals (professionele zorg). In this categorization, the nuclear family members are distinguished from the other family members.
other close relatives such as siblings. Parents are usually important support providers for young widows.

In the analysis of the neighbourly support, it is clear that neighbourly relations are often intermingled with other forms of social relationships such as kinship, friendship, co-memberships in certain organisations, patron-client relationship even employee-employer relationship. Neighbourly relations can also be established both informally and formally. Consequently, widows can gain and receive supports from various relationships they engage with their neighbours. So, the category of ‘neighbourly support’ does not exclude friends, patrons, employer etc. However, the various available forms of neighbourly support are not always accessible for every widow. Support rendered by the individual or informal groups of neighbours is usually influenced by residential proximity, the length of residence and the widows’ age, while support provided by the formal (neighbourhood) organisations is usually determined by the widows’ involvement in these organisations.

The third category of support is that provided by the state. Here, I focus on pension schemes and health insurance. This category of support is only accessible for limited numbers of widows, but it is still a part of the whole support configuration. Moreover this support is very substantial for those who are entitled to it though these people are only a small number. In countries with sophisticated welfare systems like the Netherlands, the state as support provider is also embodied in many forms of professional care (*professionele zorg*). In this context, the professional carers are those who work in institutions that vary from hospitals, day care for children, elderly homes, and shelters for the homeless, to crisis centres for women (Brink, 1999:64-71). The questions are then, what is the place of these professional support providers within the support figuration in Indonesia? What do they mean for the widows’ well being?

Let us focus on the one of the domains that is relevant for the widows namely the elderly care. Most of the elderly homes (*panti jompo* or *panti wredha*) in Indonesia are stigmatised as the last resort for poor old people without family. In many cases, the right to reside in these homes is based on a recommendation from the regional social affairs office (*dinas sosial daerah*). Nevertheless, there are a few private elderly homes with monthly payment for the services. An example is the Sasana Tresna Wreda in Jakarta (Kompas, 1 November 1998). Although this elderly home tries to vary the monthly payment from Rp. 50.000 to Rp. 500.000, it is accessible only for those who can pay. Moreover, the idea that putting one’s old parents or grandparents in this home is a sign of lack of respect and
responsibility for the elderly, causes hesitation among many people in making use of this service. How about the professional care that is performed in old people’s own homes?

In Indonesia, the most common ‘in house and all round’ services are performed by a housemaid (pembantu rumah tangga). Commonly, a housemaid is an aid in doing the various household chores. However, it is not uncommon that a housemaid gets a special task such as taking care of the children or a sick or an elderly person in the family. During the last fifteen years, hiring a nurse or babysitter has become more and more common among the middle and upper class. Unlike a ‘usual’ housemaid, a nurse (suster) or babysitter has completed a special training for the job. Therefore, she also has a higher salary and better working condition. Most of the demands are for a babysitter, but there are well to do families that hire a suster to take care of a sick and old family member.

Almost 95% of the widows who belong to the research population do not hire a housemaid to assist them in doing household chores or to take care of them in period of illness. The 5% who do hire a housemaid are indeed the well off widows in the research population. It is obvious that professional services in support and care in Indonesia are very exclusive. These professional services are commonly inaccessible for those with limited income such as most of the widows in the alleys. Therefore, in this study, I do not pay special attention to this category of support/care providers.

Another private or market based protection, which is mentioned in the introduction but remains invisible in the analysis, is private insurance. This kind of protection is unmentioned in the previous chapters, because none of the widows who belong to the research population has any form of private insurance. In this matter, the widows represent the lower class population in general; those who cannot afford to buy policy and pay the premiums. Despite its existence, it is obvious that private insurance does not play a role in the widows’ efforts to cope with contingencies and hardships.

The support flows
Concerning family and neighbourly support, this study showed that the support landscape is also made more complex by the fact that people who engage in support relationships can have either different or (relatively) similar socio-economic position. Support among people with different socio-economic position flows vertically and support among people with similar socio-economic position flows horizontally. Generally, support relationships among people with different socio-economic position tend to be associated with flows from the plus to the minus. However, the preceding chapters show that in the practice support flows are more
complicated than that. People do not only have different means (labour, cash, properties, privileges) to support others but also different needs of support. A well-off widow does not need economic support, but she may need emotional or practical support. This kind of support can be provided by a relative or neighbour regardless of their socio-economic position.

If the emotional or practical support is indeed provided by the poorer relative or neighbour, it is important to be aware that a vertical support flow from ‘the disadvantaged’ to ‘advantaged’ is not necessarily aimed (by the disadvantaged) to gain economic advantages. On the contrary, the horizontal support flows among people who are in a comparable socio-economic position can have well-calculated (economic) expectations and aims. In analysing neighbourly support in chapter five, I highlighted how the flow of support can also be distorted. One example is the practice of giving meat to the poor as economic support during the hari raya kurban (one of the yearly Islamic festivities). I mentioned a few widows in Kacangan alley who complained that the richer neighbours usually slaughtered goats as offerings and donated the meats to each other instead of providing them as economic support for the needy neighbours. In this case, a support institution that is initially aimed at a vertical support from those who have more to those who are poor has been modified by the advantaged to strengthen the (economic) exchanges among themselves.

The expectation of counter obligation is another root of support complexity. At this point, support flow can be distinguished by one-way and two-way flow. One-way flows happen when the support recipient does not provide any or only very limited support in return. This flow is very close to what Sahlins (1996:31-32) categorized as the generalized reciprocity that is characterised by the almost complete absence of counter obligation.

If we look at the neighbourly support in the alleys, the most obvious one-way support is often that provided for old and poor widows. In most of the alleys there are cases where neighbours provide economic and practical supports for an old and poor widow who lives alone. The support providers are certain that their help will not be reciprocated. They define their support as a good deed without an expectation for a counter-obligation. The provider may be aware that providing this good deed can enhance their social status, nevertheless it is also obvious for both parties that the recipient would not be able to give anything in return. It is noteworthy that in all cases, these one-way supports are relatively minor ones although they can be provided regularly. Moreover, the supports are mostly economic ones such as giving meals, staple foods or small amounts of money with relatively small personal involvement. In chapter five I described cases where neighbours do provide one way practical support such as
repairing the deteriorated kitchen of an old widow or bringing a sick widow to a hospital, but these practical support do not have to be performed for a longer period.

In the discussion on generalized reciprocity (and other similar concepts), the emphasis is often put on the absence of (or the very limited) expectation for a counter-obligation. But this is only half the picture. Another half is, what kind of support people are willing to give when they do not expect counter-obligation. In this regard, I underline that one-way supports only involve certain kinds of support with certain degree of intensity. In other words, although people are willing to provide one-way support that implies generalized reciprocity, they do not provide all kinds of support in this way.

Like neighbourly support, the best observable one way support in the familial sphere is support provided for an old widowed relative (mother, grandmother, aunt etc.). In chapter four, there are cases where children take care of their widowed mothers in many respects (economically, emotionally and practically). Because of their old age and ill health, these mothers are more or less net support recipients. If we look at the support relations at that moment in a ‘snap shot’ perspective, then the supports flow indeed seems to be one way namely, from the children to the old mothers. But, if we place the support relations within a longer time perspective and take into account the changes in provider-receiver roles at the different life stages, we will come to the conclusion that the supports, which are received by the old mothers now, cannot simply be seen as one way. The support they are receiving now should be understood in relation to what these mothers earlier did for the children. Providing support for the old mothers is a kind of reciprocation for support they received from the mothers in the past. At this point we come to the fluidity of support relationships that I shall discuss more below.

The two-way support is, in the first place, characterised by a more concise expectation for a counter obligation. All the parties involved in the support relation are aware of this expectation, although it is not necessarily negotiated explicitly. A child who stay to take care of an old widowed mother commonly will inherit the mother’s house or at least will be allowed to stay as along as she/he wants. Other children are usually aware of and accept this privilege, although they do not make an explicit negotiation and agreement about it (Finch and Mason, 1993:61). Thus, if we go back to Sahlin’s (1996:32) categories of reciprocity, two way support can be compared with the balanced reciprocity, namely reciprocity that ‘[…] refers to direct exchange. In precise balance, the reciprocation is the customary equivalent of the thing received and is without delay’.

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In a two-way support, the counter-support is also supposed to be more or less equivalent in its value (economic, emotional or practical values), but each of the parties involved can subjectively assess the value. A financial support such as the *uang jajan* (pocket money) may – objectively - have a low economic value because it is a small amount of money and only occasionally provided. However, this support – subjectively - can have a high emotional value for the receiver since it symbolises attention and affection.

The distinction between objective and subjective assessment probably is not a ‘ready for use’ analytical tool to understand how do people estimate the equivalence of (the expected) counter obligation, nevertheless, it is important to be aware that the parties involved in support relations can estimate and calculate the ‘balance’ differently. The empirical data showed two results of this difference, first it can undermine the support relation and second, it can also be flexibly accepted.

The concept of ‘balanced reciprocity’ also refers to the finite and narrow period in which the reciprocation has to be given. However, as discussed before, the long-term bonds among family members can allow people to invest in two-way support within different stages of life. Therefore, in this study the concise expectation for a counter-obligation is perceived as more important in marking a two-way support than the direct or short-term fulfilment of the expectation. Or in other words, a two ways support also implies potentiality.

**The support relationships**

General qualities of support relations also contribute to the complexity of the support landscape. In this study I leave out ‘self support’ from the support configuration. Therefore, the receiver and provider of support are two (or more) different persons or groups. Regarding the difference among receivers and providers of support, it is perceivable that the nature of their interaction is also varied. Nevertheless, three general qualities of support relation, which are especially relevant for understanding the dynamic of support relation among relatives and neighbours, can be illuminated.

The first quality refers to the *multiplicity of support relationships*. As I mentioned in chapter one, people are usually involved into different sets of support relations, either as a provider or as a receiver. This multiplicity exists both in familial as well as in neighbourly support. The multiplicity of support relationships among family members is made possible by the fact that the (close) relationships of family members are not limited by the membership in the same households or the co-residency. It is noted in chapter four that many widows have family members as neighbours. For these widows it is possible to establish the intensive and
day-to-day based support relations not only with their co-resident children but also with their siblings, nieces, nephews, etc. who live in the same neighbourhood. The multiplicity of support relation among family members is also encouraged by the bilateral nature of the (Javanese and Madurese) kinship system. In this system both the male and female lines are considered as equally important, therefore the kin networks are commonly wide. Within this kinship system, one can engage in support relations both with his/her father and mother’s kinsmen.

The multiplicity of support relationships among neighbours is facilitated by various forms of relationships that neighbours can engage in with each other. A neighbour can be a friend, a kind of patron or client, employee or employer etc. One will engage in a different support relation with a neighbour who is his/her employer or long-term friend than with other ‘ordinary’ neighbours. Moreover, neighbourly relations, and thus the support relations among neighbours, are also established and maintained both within the ‘informal’ as well as the ‘formal’ domain such as in the neighbourly organisations.

The second quality is the intertwining of support relations. When support is needed, commonly there will be different support providers who can render different kinds and forms of support either at the same time or in different phases (of the crisis). In providing the supports, the different support providers can mutually make up what is lacking. This is an intertwinemen where the support providers complement each other. However, a provider can also give support that is supposedly rendered by the other provider. In this intertwinemen one provider becomes a substitute for the other. Both in the complementary and the substitutionary intertwinemen, the multiple support relation can facilitate and compose a ‘package of support’.

The intertwinemen also refers to the manners in which the various support providers react toward each other by taking into account the different degree of obligation they have to support the person(s) in distress. Support providers are aware that they are not obliged in the same way and degree. Family members are commonly considered as being more obliged to support than other providers such as neighbours or friends. Nevertheless, there is no such fixed guideline. It is not uncommon that a provider plays a more important role than what is expected to be his/her portion. For example, I have never encountered a case where neighbours are totally indifferent when a widow needs to be helped but cannot get the help from her relatives or other support providers. Commonly, neighbourly support is more limited than family support, but neighbours do play a more important role as support providers when
it is needed and other providers, especially the family members, are not present (yet). This situation often happens in a sudden crisis or calamity.

The third quality is the *fluidity of support relations*. The support relationship is fluid first of all because the needs and claims for support (from the receiving end) and the ability to provide support (from the providing end) can be incompatible. In most cases, the incompatibility between the two is caused by the increased need for support that cannot be dealt with by the ability to support. It also happens that the need for support is stable but the ability to support is decreasing. When this incompatibility takes place, the support relation will unavoidably undergo some changes. Secondly, the quality of relationships between people is changeable. If we compare relationships between relatives and between neighbours, similar causes of change can be found. People often differentiate their relatives and neighbours by using the terms ‘close’ and ‘distant’ that reflect the perception on the quality of the relation maintained. But this differentiation is not fixed since people make alliances and get involved in conflicts. For example, a close relative or neighbour can be perceived as a distant one after a conflict. In this situation, the support relation among them will also change. Thirdly, the roles in support relation are changeable throughout different life stages. This is valid (to different extents) both for support relations between relatives and for those between neighbours. However, the long-term bonds among relatives can make the changes in support roles along different life courses more likely to happen than the neighbourly ties that are bound to the nearness in place.

2. The Hierarchical Landscape of Support

If we return to the chapters four, five and six, where family support, neighbourly support and their intertwinement were examined, we learn that some support providers are more obliged to support the widows than others. Children, for example, are more obliged to support their widowed mothers than nieces and nephews. Immediate neighbours are more involved in helping relationships with each other than with neighbours who live a few alleys further. Both in family as well as neighbourly spheres there is a differentiation between ‘the close’ and ‘the distant’ or between ‘the inner’ and ‘the outer’ circle that generally indicates the quality of relationships. Those who belong to one’s ‘close’ or ‘inner’ circle are usually more obliged to support than those who belong to the ‘distant’ or ‘outer’ circle. Viewed from the other direction, from the support receivers’ point of view, people tend to feel more free in asking for support or assistance from their close relatives, neighbours or friends than from distant
ones. Beside the quality of relationship, the greater obligation to provide support can be caused by moral debt or engagement in a reciprocal relationship. This explains why children who stay at the widowed mother’s house and will inherit the house, are more obliged to provide old age care than the other children. Inheritance is also one of the important means for childless widows to create and maintain support relationships with adopted children although this is not always acknowledged explicitly.

In the view of all this, it can be concluded that in a support figuration providers and recipients of support occupy different positions that are arranged in order of rank according to a few matters such as the quality of relationships, moral debt or engagement in a reciprocal relationships. This order of rank is the hierarchy of right and duty. The higher place in the hierarchy of right implies the stronger right for getting more intensive and durable support. While the higher place in the hierarchy of duty implies the greater obligation to provide more intensive and durable support.

Although one’s position within the hierarchy is normatively more or less fixed, practically, it is changeable. People can (deliberately) raise their position within the hierarchy by taking more responsibility than they should or lower their position by creating emotional and/or physical distance, for example by ignoring or even denying the hierarchy. Usually, the intention to raise one’s position within the hierarchy will result in appreciation and the intention to lower one’s position will cause disapproval. In the Javanese context, both the rewards as well as the punishments are mainly moral and social. This can explain why it is insecure to rely on the family and community based support although these supports are commonly (still) perceived as being very important.

Let us return to family and neighbourly support. Both in support relationships among family members as well as among neighbours there are normative guidelines - such as rukun (harmonious), urmat and bekti (respect) - on how people should care about and assist each other (for example about who are expected to help whom, in what ways and to what extent). These normative guidelines place certain people in a higher position within the hierarchy than others. Children are more expected to show respect to their parents by taking care of them well at the old age, thus, are more obliged to provide old age support, than other relatives.

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4 In the case of adoption people’s effort to raise their position within the hierarchy can be seen. When a person adopts a child he/she takes the responsibility of taking care of the child as a parent. By inventing this parent-child relationship, the adoption parent will occupy a higher position in the hierarchy of right and duty towards the adopted child. In other words, by taking care of the child and engaging in a stronger affective relationship with the child an adoption parent can expect to be treated similarly by the adopted child.
However, some cases in the previous chapters showed that in practice, elderly parents are not always taken care of well by their children. Some widows have to live in severe circumstances because their children and other close relatives have abandoned them. Children who abandon their elderly parents will be seen negatively but, as I wrote before, the consequences are merely moral. An interesting situation can be found in Singapore where the children’s refusal to take care of their elderly parents has legal consequences. The state can force children to provide economic support for their parent (NRC Handelsblad, 17 August 1996). In this situation, the hierarchy of duty does not only function morally but also legally.

The changes of position within the hierarchy of right and duty is not always done purposely, since the actual fulfilment of duty also depend on matters that are not always compatible with people’s intentions. A provider of support who occupies a high position within the hierarchy of duty can fail to provide the expected support because he/she simply does not have the means for it. This situation usually leads to a bitter acceptance, rather than causes an open conflict, although people are disappointed. On the other hand, there are circumstances such as a sudden crisis where support providers unintentionally (have to) render more support than is expected. This situation was examined in chapter 5 where neighbours – instead of family members - tend to act as the prime support providers for the widows and take a greater responsibility because the widows’ relatives are absent.

The idea of a hierarchy in providing and receiving support implies different ranks of support relationships. Each rank is occupied by different providers and receivers of support according to the quality of relationships between the parties involved, moral debts or engagement in a reciprocal relationship. The usage of the terms close/distant or inner/outer in the analysis above mainly highlights the vertical dimension of the rank within the hierarchy. Nevertheless, each rank also has a horizontal dimension in the sense that a same rank can be occupied by several (potential) donors or recipients. If siblings are perceived as all belonging to the same rank, ideally, a person should provide the same assistance at the same extent to all of his/her siblings. The cases showed however that in practice this rarely happened. Usually people have to choose because the means of support are not enough to fulfil every claim for support. Besides matters such as quality of relationships, moral debts and engagement in a reciprocal relationship, the consideration to choose can also be based on the seriousness of the problem. This is often parallel with the way in which the deservingness of a support recipient is appraised. If in a particular period, a few requests for assistance come from those who are considered as belonging to the same rank, for instance, one’s own parents and one’s parents in law, and the provider cannot deal with this situation, she/he has to choose to whom the
assistance will be given. In the discussion on fluidity of support relationship among relatives (Chapter 4), I showed a case where a daughter postponed the monthly financial support for her own widowed mother because she decided to use the money to finance the expensive hospitalisation of her parent in law. She knew that the postponement would cause problems to her mother but the sick parent in law was perceived as having a more serious problem, thus, as more deserving of assistance.

Hierarchy is one of the important elements in Javanese society, therefore, it is not surprising when the findings of this study demonstrate that in Java, support is obtained and provided hierarchically. However, the hierarchy of right and duty is not a phenomenon found only in support relationships in Java. Hierarchy implies a universal distinction between ‘more’ and ‘less’. Although it may be formulated and stressed differently in different contexts, this distinction is crucial in dealing with limitations, preferences and choices in obtaining and providing support.

As I wrote in the preceding chapters, scholarly inquiries on widows and widowhood often emphasise the marginality of widows’ position. The findings of this study challenge the generalization of widows’ marginal and exceptional position by demonstrating that in Java, widows’ marginality is dependent upon various factors and not specifically related to the widowhood. The knowledge of problems pertaining to widowhood and the ways widows cope with these problems provide insights on various issues, such as gender relationships, intergenerational bonds, kinship, neighbourly ties, aging, poverty, and welfare policy, that are highly relevant for the non-widow categories too. Accordingly, the ways in which support arrangements for widows work also reflect general lines of support relationships and support flows in Javanese society. The findings prove that for the majority of the research population, who work in the informal sector and belong to the lower socio-economic position, the state supervised social security and the private insurance are inaccessible and unaffordable. Support arrangements based on kinship and communal solidarity are, thus, the more realistic and relevant option. Nevertheless, family and community support should not simply be perceived as the substitutes for state support. Their omnipresence is definitely not an excuse for ignoring the exclusivity of the existing social insurance schemes. This study shows that, although people can call on a great many methods of obtaining support, protection against insecurity and hardship should not be understood by the state as a responsibility, which can be handed over to the individual.