



## BEYOND BULLET: HIDDEN BATTLES OF INDIAN WAR WIDOWS

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Email Id: [abolimoharkar@gmail.com](mailto:abolimoharkar@gmail.com)**Abstracts***“If men were the principal casualties of the War, these widows represent its, collateral damage”**- Author and historian Ed Payne.*

India has the highest number of war widows in the world. There is no other group affected by the inhumanities of war than widows. This heroic nature of the death of martyrs leads the entire nation and media to speak about the glory of these men who lost their lives on the battlefield but these atrocities of war leave lifelong devastating effects on war widows. This paper aims to capture the struggle of these women wrapped in glorified widowhood. However, this glory quickly fades as the war widows are forgotten and left to fight their own battles. The author is also a war widow and that is how she has attempted to understand different trajectories of the grieving process widows go through in their lives. The journey of rebuilding their lives is a dynamic process, and it is influenced by social economic factors, especially in the context of India as women are subjected to stereotypical expectations, especially from the lens of gender, where despite their trauma they are compelled to perform duties as a daughter-in-law, mother, and widow where they often struggle to give priority to their own mental and physical health. In some cases, families, friends, and the military support mechanisms. Above all, these women rise on their own to rebuild their lives between pride and pain. This study also sheds some light on both challenges and positive factors towards recovery experienced by widows to achieve the holistic way of life on their own.

**Key Words:** Bullet, Battles, Widows.

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**Introduction**

Over decades India has been part of wars and national instability. Though the last official war fought by the Indian Armed forces was the Kargil war in 1999, India has been in a constant state of war for years, especially in the region of Jammu Kashmir and some parts of the Northeast. Due to terrorism and insurgencies, there are approximately 120-160 battle casualties annually, as per the data derived from the National war memorial, Delhi. This involves terrible experiences for people affected directly with these casualties, like wives of Martyrs. They are referred to as ‘War widows.’ These women have lost their husbands in military action, international peacekeeping operations, counterinsurgencies, internal security situations. India has the highest number of war



widows globally, which is around 25000. These women are left behind after the martyrdom to face life independently. This research paper attempts to understand and highlight the hidden battle of Indian war widows and their journey beyond martyrdom. It is an attempt to understand the different trajectories in their lives from before the incident, their perception of the journey of widowhood and intersection, and the additional baggage of being a war widow. Even though husbands are posted in volatile locations and are exposed to the risk, they can never be prepared for the death of the spouse. The death of the spouse is always a life-altering event for the other partner.

There is a lack of research on the Indian war widows specially to understand their struggle between pride and pain. The sense of understanding death through the lens of supreme sacrifices might help them find meaning to the sudden death but on the other side of it they have a societal burden of carrying the pride and to fit into expectations of being a 'Veer Naris'.

Apart from dealing with their loss, there are different dimensions to their journey such as how the transition of widowhood is processed, how there is the change in perception, and while doing all of it there are additional responsibilities of documentation, arrangement of resources, legal and financial formalities, taking responsibility of in-laws, children.

The author of this paper is a war widow and she has attempted to express her own experience along with narratives from other war widows. The Paper is mainly dependent on the secondary data of existing research done on the intersection of grief, pride, war widows, mental health, and patriarchy in the Indian context.

### Perception of death

The response to the news of death is very diverse ranging from silence, disbelief, shock, inconsolable crying, and in some cases, acceptance (Elder, 2012). The loss is intense as there is no chance of saying goodbye. This loss is generally associated with a sudden change in life, loss of all the dreams and future aspirations. Sudden death is a crisis-inducing situation as it does not give people time to prepare for its finality (Golan, 1975). In the Indian marriage system, there are certain roles decided by both genders, after the loss of a partner these roles range from managing the household to shaping a future for their children as a single parent. These responsibilities may bring about feelings of incompetence, unpreparedness, and stress (Toth, 2005) Widows then become both the father and mother of their children. When the impact on children is another aspect of their grief process.

Couple Dynamics play a vital role in the grieving phase, in the case of an interdependent couple where both of them have an independent identity, for a widow it is about emotional void and loneliness that dominates the grief process. For couples where both of them have fixed gender roles, it is difficult for a widow to switch these roles and take responsibility for the household, children and that brings a big life change. This stage also marks a sense of understanding and gaining perspective into emotional and social life, which leads widows to reach out to others in the same situation. They become more independent, however, for those without an extended family the final stage often brings along feelings of loneliness. (Golan, 1975). Perception of death also develops as the widow gets a sense of the death through emotional, social exposure that happens over the period. Especially in the context of war widows, it takes more time as it is very sudden death and the burden of pride and supreme sacrifices come along with it. Last rights are generally at a large scale therefore the widow is highlighted through the lens of the media and local public. It adds additional stress on her to feel emotions naturally on that day. Even after the years



of death, they keep the uniform and the flag in which the husband was wrapped on the last day. There are infinite memories associated with these objects. Where they also consider these as objects of pride, glory, and motivation. Prolonged documentation and formalities from the Armed forces and Government further make the grief process difficult. As Worden's fourth and final stage of grief theory would say, this could be a way for the war widows to continue a relationship with the deceased while setting on with their new life (McCoyd, 2009).

### **Mental Health Morbidities**

Widows have a higher chance of suffering from mental illness than their non-widowed counterparts (Amaran, 2005). There are multiple theories that talk about how many life events can be a potential risk factor for widows to develop common mental health morbidities like self-harm, feeling suicidal, depression, and anxiety. Prolonged Grief Disorder is also associated with spousal bereavement and approximately 10% of the bereaved people are affected by it (Bryant, 2014). Due to the glory attached with the grief, it influences their pain and there is a delayed response to the death and grief. In the case of traumatic grief, it can have severe damage to a widow's mental health. Though the process of grieving is not linear and it's subjective to every widow, the experience of this life event, emotional distress can lead to unstable mental health for the lifetime. Sometimes these symptoms are associated and manifested in physical pain such as persistent headache, backache, shoulder pain, digestive problems following the bereavement. For war widows, forced pride and respect can also be detrimental. Sometimes having a label of being 'strong' and 'courageous' can take away the freedom to be sad and perhaps, not as strong. Always holding up to the image of being courageous can be tiring and all the participants' have had days when they were especially down and sad. They suppress their pain by the pressure of pretending to be okay and to fit in the bracket of war widows. This can cause unstable mental health for a long time.

Grief is central to the experience of mental illness — for people diagnosed, their families, and their friends. Yet grief is almost absent from the literature and practice of mainstream psychiatry (Young, et, al 2004) Onset of mental illness is associated with grief and acts as a hindrance to seeking help. When therapy and trauma-informed interventions should be normalized in these situations in reality it reflects the stigma attached to seeking help from mental health services in India. From an outer perspective, they are overburdening their friends or family with tasks or talks of death and might withdraw from expressing their true feelings. This would lead to detrimental effects on their physical and psychological well-being (Verney, 2007).

Some of the strong coping mechanisms are having a strong support system through friends, family, and also from the Armed forces. There are possibilities of post-traumatic growth in the case of war widows as they have always been resilient by being in the Army fraternity. They have a bigger way of looking at martyrdom which has the potential to rise above the loss and be an inspiration for others but doing it can be a journey of ups and downs as trauma stays for a lifetime.

### **Social construct for war widows**

Any form of support plays an important role in the healing process for war widows. Most of the time what happens is there is a lot of support initially from family, friends, even the local population as they look up to the martyrdom with respect but as time only closes family and friends, siblings act as a support system. The willingness to support the martyr's family diminishes slowly. Widows who had high expectations from their social circle were dissatisfied with the support provided as time passed (Bisconti, 2007). The rest of the society soon develops a stereotypical



outlook for a widow. Some of these notions are self-constructed and some of them are influenced by movies, media, and myths. There are a certain way people would accept a widow to mourn her loss. Widows feel the pressure to be scanned all the time as people are always ready to pounce with judgment.

One of the most common things is judging the widow for her grief process, there is a certain way of expression for her if she steps out, and dressed in a certain way which is not as per the societal outlook for a widow. If she takes a practical decision to buy a house to secure her own future she will be judged to misuse or overspend the money she got from the Army and Government. This financial support often becomes the talk of the town and each step taken by a widow is being looked at from the same lens. Whereas the money is a provision made by their husbands and Armed forces considering the risk involved in the profession. Somehow society equates that money with happiness considering now the widow and her children have nothing to worry about, but in reality, no amount of money can buy them peace or happiness. They would always prefer to have their husband on their side and to continue the life they had planned for than the money.

The author remembers the incident as once she was asked in an interview about her social media profile as the interviewer was not convinced that's her real profile and the only reason was, she has posted a lot of travel images. This just reflects societal expectations from young widows. They have to think twice before stepping out or making any public appearance. If they look sad, people would say, you should be proud of your husband, why don't you carry the loss gracefully. If she is outspoken, outgoing, and carries herself boldly they would say she got over too soon. There is also subtle pressure on war widows to join forces, some of them join for genuine interest but sometimes it is suggested to them that's the only way people look at their lives. It is difficult for a society to accept the identity of a war widow as an individual person who can have dreams and aspirations apart from her loss and grief.

### **Struggle Between Patriarchy and Patriotism**

While the term 'widow' is associated with stigma, the prefix of 'war' widow or being called a 'veer naris (courageous woman) brings with it dignity and respect (Zins, 2007).

Although there are challenges created by society as mentioned above in the paper, there is a sense of pride and respect attached to the identity of a war widow. They are considered as inspiration as they rise above the supreme sacrifice. Society showers them with respect through various public events to portray the image of strong women. These events can help war widows to feel motivated to achieve their dreams. But there are also incidents when they are looked at from the lens of pride by civilians, they often feel these widows and their families were aware of the risk and because of their patriotism they chose this life, so the martyrdom will be easy for them to accept but in reality, no human being can be ready to face the loss of their spouse. Rather knowing the risk and still choosing this life demands a lot of courage but they can never be immune to facing death.

On the other side of the pride, there is deep-rooted patriarchy, especially in the context of Indian society. Structure of patriarchy influences gender dynamics and inter-gender connections. Patriarchy manifests itself in the most dominant form in a country like India - whether it is something as violent as sati in the olden days, female foeticide, or as subtle as discrimination at the workplace. (Kamla Bhasin 1993). There is a huge difference between how a widow is treated and how a widower is treated in Indian society. Grieving expectations are different for widowers and widows. Widowers can grieve individually but widows do not have that freedom. For widows, there is always



a sense of stigma attached. When it comes to cultural rituals, war widows are often discriminated against and always reminded of their widowhood. The author narrates being treated differently even by close friends and relatives, especially during weddings and festivals, where pride takes a back seat and patriarchy comes in the front. Patriarchy manifests itself through culture, rituals, education, life choices, gender, and power dynamics at both micro and macro level. Even personal choice like sexuality is directly related to their loyalty towards their husband's sacrifice for the nation. Women are always considered as someone to be taken care of in patriarchal society which reflects the hierarchy and power dynamics in the societal structures. On one side their husbands are raised to the pedestal at the national level, their memorials are built but war widows are left behind alone between the two walls of patriarchy and patriotism.

### Conclusion

This paper is an attempt to raise awareness about the struggles of war widows which go unnoticed in the light of pride. Certainly, there are expectations of being a strong woman for war widows, it takes time for them to maintain the balance between being strong yet allowing themselves to feel the pain. It is important for them and society to look at war widows as an individual entity and as any human, they have their own struggle with loss and baggage that come along with it. On one side societal gaze is influenced by ideas of patriotism and forced pride and on the other side, these ideas are coloured by patriarchy for war widows. This takes a toll on both the mental and physical health of war widows. They still rise above with resilience and strength as this life comes with a combination of grief, risk, pain, pride, and glory.

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