



TECHNIUM
SOCIAL SCIENCES JOURNAL

Vol. 26, 2021

**A new decade
for social changes**

www.techniumscience.com

ISSN 2668-7798



9 772668 779000

Remarriage of elderly Widows: Widows' attitude and fear regarding new romantic relationships

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Abstract. This study examines the fears, after the death of their partners, which elderly widows experience regarding a new romantic relationship, in other words the decision whether to stay single or remarry. Participants in the study were widows who provided information about their attitude and fears regarding remarriage. The study operationalizes the theory of marriage in order to understand the factors that influenced their decisions whether to remain single or opt for remarriage. The study is anchored in a phenomenological approach. Semi-structured interviews with elderly widows who were not currently married were employed to collect data. The data were analyzed using thematic content analysis that defined the experiences and perceptions of elderly widows. The findings were categorized into five main themes: fear of being ostracised by in-laws and family pressure, poor previous marriages, the caregiver role, inheritance rights, and not being able to find a suitable partner. Their involvement in a remarried relationship is perceived as taboo by both family and family-in-law. Furthermore, they see a remarriage as compromising their inheritances rights and are aware of the difficulty of finding a partner who matches their preference.

Keywords. remarriage, widows, in-laws and family pressure, poor previous marriage, caregiver role, inheritance rights and not finding a suitable a right partner

Introduction

Remarriage of elderly widows occurs as a result of the death of a husband. A widow is a woman who has lost her husband as a result of death and has not remarried (Motsoeneng & Modise 2020). Widows make up seven to 16 percent of the adult population of women worldwide (Osmani, Matlabi, & Rezaei, 2018). Widows, like most women, would opt for remarriage in order to have a better quality life free from loneliness, depression, and cultural ostracism from community members. Widows often take long to mourn, leading to delays in taking the positive step towards remarriage (Amato, 2010; James & Shafer, 2012). Remarriage, arising at a later stage of life, may pose the serious challenges of having to integrate the new partner into family and existing friendship networks, which may outweigh the benefits a new partner bestows (James & Shafer, 2012).

The barriers to elderly remarriage are multidimensional and differ from one society to another (Sun & Song, 2014). The barriers include children disapproving of marriage (Osmani, Matlabi & Rezaei, 2018). Strong relationships with children may cause many widows to view remarriage as compromising these relationships, thus discouraging a widow from finding

companionship in a romantic partner (Carr & Boerner, 2013). The remarriage of widows is highly controlled by cultural sanctions imposed on them and remarriage can be viewed as a betrayal of the deceased's family (Hu & To, 2018; Bennett, Arnott & Soulsby, 2013). To remain part of the husband's family, the widow is expected to remain loyal and not remarry. In addition, the remarriage of elderly widows has the potential to complicate both present relationships and interfere with inheritance rights (Marhánková, 2016). Adding to these already complicated relationships, when the partner leaves his/her home to join another partner, not only are relationships with family compromised, but there is the risk of losing his/her own house (De Jong Gierveld, 2004).

Widows are limited in finding viable partners: the ratio of 3 women to 2 men in the age group 65 and older decreases to 3 to 1 as age climbs to 85 and older (Carr & Boerner, 2013). This gender imbalance partly reflects the highly skewed sex ratio among older adults. Widows' market for potential partners significantly decreases with age, as most people of their age group are already married (Rosenfeld & Thomas 2012: 538). They have limited choice and find themselves having to settle for a partner outside their class (Qian & Lichter, 2018).

Widows who have experienced poor previous marriages are very reluctant to remarry, while those who have had good marriages show an interest in remarriage (Alterovitz & Mendelsohn, 2013). Some widows value their freedom very much, this being more important to them than living their lives around a new husband (Koren, 2016). Widows often do not marry because of high standards set by their late husbands – they are reluctant to go down a bit (Bennett, Arnott & Soulsby, 2013). Most of them wish to avoid a continued life of struggle that they may have lived all their lives (Angel, Jiménez, Angel, 2007).

Theory of marriage

In the marriage market, individuals have preference for an ideal partner, wishing for one who may be good looking, wealthy and well-educated (Moorman, Booth & Fingerman, 2006). In a remarriage, however, the ideal partner's characteristics such as education, age and children from the previous marriage may have a negative impact on the quality of the future relationship (Berntsen & Kravdal, 2012). This, and other factors such as age, may be a barrier for women to realize their preference and maximize their utility in the marriage market (Qian & Lichter 2018).

According to Moorman, Booth and Fingerman (2006), the marriage market is regulated by the laws of supply and demand. If supply of men exceeds the demand of women, the chances of getting a partner increase, as does the likelihood of meeting individual standards. Alternatively, if the demand exceeds the supply, it is difficult to find a partner. The prospect of having your choice being met faces obstacles such as the pool of potential partners available (Schwartz, 2013). In the case of elderly widows, the market is saturated – all the good men are taken and those available do not meet personal preferences.

Methods

The study operationalises the phenomenological approach (Smith & Osborn, 2015), which uses in-depth interviews to understand widows' attitudes towards remarriage (Eberle, 2014). The data was analyzed using thematic content analysis (Clark, Braun, & Hayfield, 2015) in line with a phenomenological approach (Shinebourne, 2011).

Respondents

Ten respondents were purposively sampled, all of them being 60 years and above. The oldest was 71 years old. They have been widows for three to nine years. They were mainly from a rural setting of South Africa. They spoke mainly Sesotho.

Data collection and procedure

The data was gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews (Patton, 2015) conducted with the 10 widows. The widows interviewed were between the ages of 65 and 71. They were scheduled and took place at their own homes at convenient times, all 10 of the widows having agreed to participate. The researcher used snowball sampling to recruit the potential participants.

The university ethics committee approved the study with the understanding that the participants who had consented to the study would be protected. Written consent was signed by all participants. The participants were given assurances of confidentiality and anonymity at all times during the course of the study. The researcher stressed to the participants that enrolling to participate in the study was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw at any time during the course of the study with no repercussions. The interviews were recorded with the permission of all participants. Each audio taped interview was conducted in Sesotho and lasted 30-45 minutes. Each one was transcribed verbatim and then translated into English. Interviews were conducted in locations chosen by the participants.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to recognize the meaning among the patterns of the experiences of the remarried elderly widows and widowers. Patterns were identified through rigorous data processing, coding of data, and unraveling of themes. Thematic analysis was used to validate the process – it was based on the transcripts of the subjective answers of the respondents to the given questions during the interviews.

Findings

Five themes were derived from the interviews: the fear of being ostracised by in-laws and family pressure, poor previous marriages, inheritance rights, and finding the right partner.

Theme 1: Fear of being ostracised by in laws and family pressure

If they remarried, widows feared that they would not be treated with respect and courtesy by their in-laws, whom they perceived would consider them disloyal to the families of their late husbands. Respondents had this to say during the interviews:

“In a twist of events a brother in law even suggested that we get married since too he is a widower, in order to take care of each other and assist with household. The family approve that but I was against it.” Respondent # 2

“My brothers in law visit more often, you could see these men want to check whether you have moved on. You could detect a sense of jealousy from them that you cannot bring a man in their brother’s house. My mother in law even suggested that it be better if I move in with one of her sons who is a divorcee.” Respondent # 5

“My in laws are old people they still hold the idea that I am their daughter in law even if my husband is dead. That makes it very difficult for me to move on even if I am dating I must still respect them because I am their daughter in law.” Respondent # 6

African culture often prescribes who should marry a widow (Madrigal, Ware, & Melendez, 2003). Usually, a person who is a close family member is entrusted with the responsibility of marrying a widow. Pressure from family members is such that a widow often just gives up thinking of remarriage.

“When I first thought about remarriage, I felt nervous. I thought that I am betraying my children and late husband. My children discouraged me to marry again let alone have a boyfriend. They say I am going to complicate their life to bring another man in my life and their life also because they are not sure how they will relate to him. Now I sacrifice my happiness at expense of keeping my children happy, unfortunately when they grow old and have their lives I will be all on my own.” Respondent # 3

“My children would say to me if you marry you going to change the surname now you belong to the family of a new man, you now have a different surname with your children, now you leave us without an identity. Because we lost our father we always identify with you as our mother with the same surname.” Respondent # 5

“When you grow old the children also complicate your life. I am now taking care of three grandchildren and when I think of an added responsibility of taking care of the husband I feel I cannot take any more. You see our children are selfish they only think of themselves your happiness comes last.” Respondent # 7

Children would do almost anything to discourage their mother from even thinking of remarriage. They even threatened to disown their mothers if they married again. The children believed that, when a mother gets a new husband, their relationship would deteriorate. In addition, they believed that the new father would take advantage of their mother, since many were pensioners who would not bring anything to the table.

Theme 2: Poor previous marriage

During the interviews, many elderly widows felt that committing themselves to a new partner would bring back all the hardship from their previous marriages. They would be better off without a husband, as they felt that they had suffered enough in their previous marriages. Their stories were captured and reported as follows:

“For years I spent in a marriage it was not rosy. My late husband was very abusive both physically and mentally. He would disappear for the whole week and when he is back he does not have money and I have to run around making plans for the family to survive but I am married. I do not want another abuser in my life that has affected me psychologically. I am very forcefully.” Respondent # 10

“I had a very poor marriage, I was not even sure whether I am still married because my husband would take three to five months without visiting us. During this time he did not even send us money. He completely forgot about us. When



he retired he showed up and after few years he passed away. It was my duty to bury him.” Respondent # 1

“When he came back from all those years he worked in the mines. He was sick that I thought he will pass away but he survived. After getting better he started to have affairs with women in our area. He spent his pension grant with them. He did absolutely nothing at home but expect to have a decent meal every time he is around.” Respondent # 6

Theme 3: Caregiver role

Taking care of sick husbands had taken a toll on many widows' lives. This ordeal had often left them depressed and not even considering remarriage. They realized that many elderly people develop chronic diseases and they were not prepared to see themselves as care givers once again. In the interview they revealed:

“When I think of remarrying and see how sick these men of my age group are. I think of all those times when my late husband was sick and I became a nurse for six years and do not want to be in that situation again.” Respondent # 2

“My late husband was bedridden for eight years. It was a difficult time in my life. When I think of marriage all those thoughts come back. Except that men are like children you take care of household from washing to ironing, cleaning of house and prepare a meal for him and even was the dishes. They do not do anything, they wake up and visits friends, come when they are hungry.” Respondent # 7

“The men I met after the death of my husband are all old and dependent on state pension. When they realise that you have widows pension they start making some demand that you have to buy cigarette for him and give him pocket money. You can see they just need you as an insurance to keep up their liver and cannot survive on state pension.” Respondent # 5

Theme 4: Inheritance rights

There is an uneasiness among elderly widows regarding remarriage, more especially among those who have inherited immovable assets from their late husbands. Remarriage, as they understand it, will dilute their share as their new partner will be a claimant on their estate when they pass away.

“My husband has left me a house and I got a widows' pension every month. When I decide to get marry again I forfeit the widows' pension. When I die or divorce him, he is entitled to 50% of my inheritance” Respondent #9

“I cannot trade off my children inheritance because of the marriage I not sure it will work. My husband left me a flourishing business when he passed away. I marry him, he becomes part of the business. I am the one who sacrifice more in this relationship.” Respondent # 8

“My children have raised this on several occasion that if I died what will happen to their assets, since he will take over and they are left with nothing.”
Respondent #4

In relation to inheritance rights, there was another pressure placed on elderly widows. This concerned the fear of their children that, if their mother passed away, the husband could throw them out of their late mother’s house.

Theme 5: Not finding a suitable partner

Elderly widows emphasized that finding a suitable partner was one of the barriers to remarriage. They stated that men entered into marriage with them for the benefits they could gain. A widow of eight years said:

“This guy I met is committed but unfortunately he is unemployed and the chances of him getting an employment are slim because he does not have qualifications. Again it is difficult to find a job if you do not have a skill. Another he is a heavy smoker and drinks too much, always with friends and when he comes home he is hungry and after eating straight to bed.” Respondent # 2

“My boyfriend who moved in with me created problems for children and himself, I found to be in the middle all time, with both parties complaining. I found that this man does not stop complaining about my children attitudes towards him. On the other side my children complain that he does not buy electricity, grocery, etc and he stays for free in their father’s house.” Respondent #7

Discussion

The aim of the study was to identify the barriers to remarriage which elderly widows experience. These barriers can best be described as the lack of incentive to remarry for fear of being ostracised by in-laws, family pressure, a poor previous marriage, inability to find a suitable partner, and need to protect one’s inheritance (Carr, 2004b; Vespa, 2012; Connidis, 2010). Fear of being ostracised by in-laws and family pressure play major roles in elderly widows deciding not to remarry. This includes the widow not being accepted as part of the family anymore. Then, children have a problem in accepting the stepfather – it is very difficult for children to accept the remarriage of their parents, especially the remarriage of their mothers. The remarriage of widows who have children often results in bringing together two families which create committed conflicts between the couple, their stepchildren and half-brother/sisters. Such conflict in many instances forces the children to move out of the house. Additionally, the children do not agree with remarriage because of the inheritance that will be shared by another man. All these findings are consistent with the previous literature which suggests that public constraints, as well as negative attitudes of their children about elderly remarriage, play a role (Brown, Lee. & Bulanda 2006; Mehta, 2002).

Widows who have not had good marriages feel that they would rather stay alone than commit to another marriage. Previous marriages are often characterized by abuse. Some widows lament the caring for a sick husband having brought stress into their lives. Finding a partner who is unlikely to suffer from multiple chronic diseases at a later stage of life is very difficult.

There is also a general lack of trust among elderly widows toward those men who want to marry them. An elderly widow said, “Many these days are opportunists; they are always on the lookout for a wealthy widow; we poor widows are hard to remarry.”

Study limitations

The small sample size precludes generalizability of the study findings. The study sample consisted of African women in an urban South African setting, and thus may not reflect the experiences of white women and/or those living in rural or remote areas who are economically disadvantaged.

Conclusion

The findings reveal that elderly widows opt to comprise their happiness for the sake of their in-laws and their family. The pressure from in-laws and family is a major barrier to remarriage. As long as elderly widows do not put their happiness ahead of their families, they will continue to be miserable. They need to understand that the market in which they are operating is saturated – their choice of suitable partners is very limited. Although their fear of losing their inheritance is justified, it nonetheless continues to negatively impact them, causing them to lead lonely lives.

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