

Remarriage of Elderly Widows and Widowers in Pakhtun Culture

Abstract

This study explores the trend of re-marriage among elderly widowed persons in the Pakhtun culture of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The universe of this study is Tehsil Timergara of District Lower Dir, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Respondents were identified through purposive sampling techniques. Data was collected through a semi-structured interview guide from 10 elderly widows and 10 widowers. Being male researchers, we conducted in-depth interviews with widowers, while data was collected from widows by a female research assistant. This study reveals that in Pakhtun culture the re-marriage of elderly widowed people, particularly among widows, is rare. Female respondents were not interested in re-marriage. The barriers identified in the way of their remarriage are biological, cultural, and economic factors. Very few widowers get remarried and remarriage depends upon their physical condition, authority status, financial position, and socio-cultural background of the concerned family.

Keywords: Remarriage, Pakhtun culture, Elderly widower, Elderly widow,

INTRODUCTION

Old age is a relative term that varies from society to society. In developed and developing countries, old age is seen from different perspectives. In most developed countries, where the average life expectancy is comparatively higher than the developing countries; the chronological age of 65 years is marked as the beginning of old age, while in developing countries the chronological age of 60 years is considered the beginning of old age. However, according to UNO, the age limit for becoming old is 60+ years (Gorman, 1999). In Pakistan, being a developing country, the age limit of 60 years is considered as the beginning of old age or retirement age limit (Ashiq & Asad, 2017). The aged population consists of a significant number of elderly widows and widowers, though elderly widows outnumber the widowers due to their higher life expectancy and marriages with older men than themselves. As a result, widowhood in old age is a common experience for most women (UNO, 2015). In the context of Pakistan, the demographic transition and the resultant increase in the population of elderly population began in the 1990s (Arif & Ahmed, 2010).

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According to the 1998 population census of Pakistan, there were 2.7 million widows in the female population of 69 million. The largest number of widows (442,179) was found in the age group of 75 years and above, followed by 416,773 in ages between 60 to 64 years, and 326,176 between 50 to 54 years (Hasan, 2010). At the same time, in 2013, 19 percent of older men were widowers against 52 percent of widows aged 60+ (Zaidi, Stefanoni, & Khalil, 2019). A study of existing literature reveals that very few studies have been conducted regarding the trend of re-marriage of elderly widows and widowers (Osamani, Matlabi & Rezaei, 2017) even though re-marriage may bring a positive impact on the physical, mental, and emotional well-being (Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001). Peng (2016) argues that the practice of re-marriage of aged people is increasing; however, they face certain hurdles in the way of their re-marriages.

The trend of re-marriage is different among elderly women and men (Osamani, Matlabi & Rezaei, 2017). The practice of re-marriage is found to be higher among elderly widowers than elderly widows. Regarding remarriage of elderly widowed persons, it is believed that “women mourn while men replace”. It is considered more difficult for an elderly widow to absorb the loss of her husband's death. The bereaved elderly woman mourns the loss of her deceased husband. In contrast to elderly widows, widowed men quickly find a helpmate and confidante to take the place of their late wives. Older women outnumber their male peers, and many of them face demographic obstacles to remarriage, even if they are willing to the idea of remarriage (Davidson, 2002; Carr, 2004). Two factors are considered responsible in the way of elderly people's remarriage i.e. Biological and socio-cultural

Reasons for variation in the trend of remarriage

Biological factors, in terms of physical and reproductive health, are considered responsible for gender differences in the remarriage of elderly widowed people. Men and women having good health status are expected to be sexually more active than those elderly widowed people having weak health status. Overall, men are more likely than women to be sexually active and will demonstrate better sexual interest and performance. Gender differences in terms of remarriage increase with old age (Lindau & Gavrilova, 2010). In Pakistan, women face different socio-cultural and economic challenges in the form of gender inequalities, limited employment opportunities, paid work, access to health services, and health outcomes. Women are confronting illiteracy, economic dependency, early marriages, poor medical facilities, and a weak standard of life and this situation negatively affects women's health (Nasrullah1 & Bhatti, 2012). It is argued that, as a result of weak health, elderly widows are less interested in sex and re-marriage compared to elderly widowers. Men are more likely than women to be sexually active, and are therefore more interested in sex. These gender differences increase with age and are greatest among the group of 75 to 85 years: 38.9% of men compared with 16.8% of women were sexually active, 70.8% versus 50.9% of those who were sexually active had a good quality sex life, and 41.2% versus 11.4% were interested in sex.

Multidimensional socio-cultural factors create hurdles in the way of elderly widowed people's remarriage. Usually, socio-cultural hurdles in the remarriage of elderly people include the negative attitude of children towards their parent's remarriage, poverty, and

loyalty to the ex-spouse (Burch, 1990). Socio-cultural factors, particularly in rural areas, are considered more responsible for the lack of widows' remarriage. Moreover, the low level of literacy and low socio-economic status of women throughout the course of their life leave older women in a vulnerable situation and widows are not therefore interested in remarriage (Zaidi, Stefanoni, & Khalil, 2019). It is argued that the desire of elderly widows for remarriage may create conflict with children. Resultantly, the children may withdraw their financial support. In addition, gender difference in remarriage may be linked with social support which they receive in old age. Some researchers opine that men are least interested in availing the required and available social support. In addition, men are less active in seeking social support, while women usually receive more social support from their family and friends. As a result, elderly women receive more financial and emotional support from adult children than men (Suitor, Gilligan, Johnson, and Pillemer, 2014). As elderly widows avail more psycho-social and economic support, so they do not feel the need for remarriage, unlike the elderly widowers. It is considered a challenge for the well-known theories to explain the phenomenon of remarriage among elderly people. However, this research study follows the rational choice model to explain the practice of remarriage among elderly people. Elderly people get remarried if they perceive that remarriage brings more benefits than singlehood (Carr, 2004). Elderly people perceive benefits in the form of emotional intimacy and other related advantages.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The quantification of the remarriage trend among elderly widows and widowers was not possible, therefore qualitative methodology was adopted. The universe of this study is Tehsil Timergara, District Lower Dir. Respondents were categorized into two groups on the basis of gender i.e. elderly widowed women and widowers. 10 respondents were interviewed from each group. The marital status of all the female respondents was single after widowhood. Results showed that the trend of remarriage does not exist among elderly widows in Pukhtun culture. Among male respondents, data is collected from 5 elderly men who had experienced widowhood and got remarried while 5 male respondents, who were still widowers, were selected. Respondents were identified through the purposive sampling technique. Purposive sampling techniques are suitable for this study because only the bereaved person can fully explain the experience of widowhood and the hurdles in the way of remarriage. Data is collected from the respondents through a semi-structured interview guide and observation. There were ethical hurdles during the data collection process. In addition, there was a wide gap of age between the researchers and respondents, and it was not an easy task to collect data from elderly men about this sensitive and personal matter. The local culture does not allow young people to talk with senior citizens regarding personal matters. Moreover, there were possibilities of discussions regarding the sexual experience of the respondents. To overcome the issue of data collection, we took two steps.

1-For data collection from male respondents, I requested and involved those elderly men in the data collection process with whom the male respondents could frankly discuss their feelings and widowhood experiences. Before the involvement of facilitators in data collection, we briefed them about the purpose of data collection as well as the ethical considerations of the research. With the help of such facilitators, we got the consent of the

respondents for data collection and collected data from respondents in their houses or other suitable places where it was possible to ensure privacy.

2- Pakhtun culture is strictly sex-segregated. Being a male researcher, it was not possible for me to collect data from female respondents. Data from female respondents was, therefore, collected by a qualified female research assistant after the necessary guidance and training. From female respondents, data was collected in their houses and recorded in an audio recorder which was later analyzed thematically.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Biological reasons of elderly remarriage and singlehood

Biological needs and sexual satisfaction are considered important reasons for remarriage among elderly widowers. Kalra, Subramanyam, and Pinto (2011) also argue that sexuality among elderly people is misunderstood. Human beings can enjoy a healthy sexual life even in old age. In Pakhtun culture, the single living of an elderly widower is considered culturally acceptable behavior, while remarriage is a social stigma. Usually, family members resist the remarriage of elderly widowers since it is considered to be reprehensible behavior by society. However, if the children realize that the biological needs of their widowed father are uncontrollable, then they favor the remarriage of such elderly widowers. The remarriage of such elderly widowers depends upon their socio-economic status, nature of relationship with children, physical condition, and authority status. A male respondent of 67 years who got remarried comments:

“I have sexual needs and remarriage was the only legal way to satisfy it”.

Another male respondent of 63 years stated:

“My late wife was old and often remained ill, hence unable to satisfy my sexual needs. My sexual desires were unfulfilled for the last so many years. For the fulfillment of such needs I got remarried”. \ \

Another male respondent commented:

“It is a blessing for me in old age to have a young wife, who can easily fulfill my sexual needs”

Unlike the male respondents, female respondents were reluctant to discuss their sexual life. The reason behind this is their socialization in Pakhtun culture which restricts sexual discussion with any person other than the life partner. Women are strictly expected to observe *Purdah* (veil) so that there is no chance of illegal sexual engagement for women. Female respondents briefly handled such questions that in old age (60 years and above) women lack the sexual drive and hence do not welcome participation in sexual activities. Kalra, Subramanyam, and Pinto (2011) found that women have a comparatively low level of sexual desire in their old age. Usually, working women have more active sexual lives than non-working elderly women. Elderly women usually face the challenge of a low level of vaginal lubricants and resultantly painful intercourse (Granville & Pregler, 2018). In addition, painful body condition, lack of sex-related facilities in the form of a separate room, easily accessible

bathroom and water with suitable temperature also contribute towards limited or no participation of elderly women in sexual activities. Moreover, women show less interest in pro-sexual activities such as kissing, hugging or holding hands etc (Kalra, Subramanyam & Pinto, 2011).

Sociological reasons of elderly singlehood and remarriage

In addition to biological factors, sociological factors also play an important role in remaining single and the remarriage of elderly widows and widowers. As Pakhtun society is a male dominant society, some elderly widowers can challenge the sociological barriers which create hurdles in their remarriage. However, the remarriage of an elderly widow is considered almost impossible. In addition to biological factors, various personal, psychological, and socio-cultural factors are considered responsible for the lack of remarriage among elderly widows. Widows themselves as well as the culture discourage the elderly widow's remarriage. Although Islam, being a major religion of the people of the universe, favors the remarriage of widows, yet people prefer cultural values over religion. Elderly widows having children prefer to live without marriage. Children are considered an asset and a hope for old age. Moreover, remarriage in old age is considered disloyalty with the deceased husband. If an elderly widow agrees to remarry, then also there are few chances of the remarriage because in case of remarriage the new husband is usually not willing to accept the care of her children from her previous husband (Thomas, 2008). In addition, men's preference of marriage with an unmarried woman is also considered a barrier in the remarriage of elderly widowers.

Social status and remarriage of elderly widowers

Analysis of the views of male respondents shows that the remarriage of widowers depends upon their social status in the form of authority, decision-making power, personal income, and control over resources. Male respondents with such resources can easily enter into remarriage, since economic stability plays a more dominant role in the remarriage of elderly widowers. Peng (2016) also argues that economic stability is a major factor in remarriage. Some poor widowers were single despite their desire for remarriage while economically stable respondents having the desire of remarriage were married. In this regard a respondent commented:

“I had financial resources and could afford the expenses of remarriage. My remarriage was impossible if my children had to afford the expenses of my remarriage”.

Another male respondent who was remarried expressed his views as

“At the time of marriage I was lacking cash in hand, however my property is in my control. I sold a piece of land and then got married”.

Analysis shows that usually, the trend of elderly widower's remarriage is higher in families with low educational background. However, in educated families, the widowers themselves as well as their family members condemn such marriages.

Children's pressure and remarriage

Pressure of children prevents elderly widows and widowers from remarriage. In Pakhtun culture, remarriage of elderly father/mother is considered a stigma for children. Sometimes, the sons of widowers resist their father's re-marriage on the ground that such marriage may lead to the birth of children and this will affect their share in property and inheritance. Moreover, the adult children of elderly widowers resist their father's marriage on the grounds of their worries about the future of their stepmother. Usually, men prefer to marry young women. A young wife of an elderly man is expected to have a higher life expectancy than such a man. In the case of the father's death, the remarriage of the stepmother is considered a stigma by children. In addition, the care of a stepmother is also considered a burden by stepsons and daughters. If she remains single, then there are chances of illegal sexual activities. Pakistan is geographically located in a region that has been called the "Patriarchal Belt" (Tabassu, 2016). Society acknowledges men to be more authoritative than women. Furthermore, financial resources in the form of property are usually in the control of elderly males. Consequently, some widowers absorb the pressure of children and remarry. A male respondent who was willing despite his willingness for remarriage commented:

"At the time of widowhood, I was physically strong and willing for marriage. My adult children, particularly my sons threatened me in case of marriage....."

Sometimes, the widowers ignore children's pressure if they feel that the children are unable to take care of them. In this regard, a male respondent who was remarried stated;

"Although my children were resisting my remarriage, however, none of them were ready to take the responsibility of my care....."

Under such circumstances, the economically stable widowers prefer to remarry with a woman of weak socio-economic status at the cost of financial incentives for the bride as well as her family.

Miscellaneous reasons for remarriage and singlehood

Although family members usually resist the remarriage of their widowed father, if the children come to know about the illegal sexual involvement of their father, then children favor such remarriage. Some male respondents, who got remarried, had faced the charges of sexual relations with women of weak socio-economic background. This situation compels the children to arrange the remarriage of their elderly widowed father.

Sometimes, the remarriage of elderly widowers is allowed under genuine conditions. In Pakhtun culture, sons, daughters, and daughters-in-law are considered responsible for the care of elder members of the family. During the daily routine of the house, men are usually not present and are busy in their work outside the house. Under such circumstances, the daughters and daughters-in-law have to take care of the elderly widowed person in the house. At times there may be physical exposure to female family members, e.g. during help in dress change or help in the toilet. In addition, sometimes the elderly widower suffers from such a disease that there are chances of his physical exposure to family members. In Pakhtun

culture, physical exposure to any person other than a life partner is condemned by society. Some family members foresee this situation and permit the remarriage of their elderly widowed father.

CONCLUSION

The practice of remarriage is rarely found among elderly widowed persons in Pakhtun culture. Very few elderly people get remarried. The practice of remarriage is higher among widowers than widows. Biological and socio-cultural factors are considered responsible for the remarriage of widows and widowers. Usually, elderly widowers, having strong biological and socio-cultural status get the opportunity of remarriage. Moreover, economic position also plays a pivotal role in the remarriage or singlehood of elderly widowers and widows. Weak physical condition and socio-cultural status may prevent elderly widows from remarriage. Elderly widows have weak biological drive and are least interested in sex and remarriage. Furthermore, social factors are also responsible for the lack of elderly widows' remarriage. Remarriage of elderly widows is considered disloyalty to the deceased husband. Elderly widows having children, avoid remarriage because children are considered a source of socio-economic and psychological support and mature children, resist the remarriage of their elderly widowed mother, considering it a matter of their honor to provide for her financial and social needs.

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