

Widowhood in Contemporary Nepal and Widows' Support Systems

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1. Introduction

The main purpose of this paper is to apply the concept of widows' support systems to the analysis of widows' life situations in Nepal. This concept was first developed by Lopata (1973, 1979) in her research on widows in Chicago, and later used by her collaborators in comparative sociological and cultural-anthropological research on widows (Lopata ed. 1987). I use this concept as a major theoretical tool for understanding the life situation of widows and its changes during the life course.

The death of a spouse initially results in a period of severe grief and emotional distress of the surviving member of the couple. Coping with this kind of psychological stress is essential for widowers and widows to remain as functioning members of society. But while widowers seem to be able to transition this period without the loss of their social networks and support systems, widows often lose important parts of their social networks and support systems depending upon the degree of prior economic and social dependence on their husbands. This latter fact is well documented in Lopata's (1979) analysis of the support systems of Chicago widows in the 1970s. But Lopata's research also hints at the effects of subcultural factors, generational differences between young and old widows, and of social change concerning the capability of widows to deal with the initial collapse and subsequent reconstruction of their social networks and support systems.

There exist considerable cultural and social differences between the life situations of widows in Nepal and widows in advanced Western societies concerning opportunities and infrastructural facilities available to them. The vast majority of Nepalese widows live within local Hindu-caste societies¹ and so are subjected to the restrictions placed on women in general and widows in particular especially through cultural norms and customs that are practiced within these local societies. These result in social isolation and discrimination against widows within their families and local society and make it very difficult for the widows to overcome the psychological stress of the death of their spouse and the time and energy necessary to rebuild their support network.

The results of my fieldwork show that the participation of widows in NGOs dealing with widows' issues provide a major infrastructural asset for widows in Nepal, which is an underdeveloped society without the systems of social security and welfare that exist in advanced societies. These NGOs play an important role in ameliorating the widows' life situations. They help these widows to establish new social contacts with other widows and freely discuss their

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experiences with them, which helps them to overcome grief, anxiety, and psychological stress in general. These NGOs also help widows understand and critically evaluate the cultural norms and customary practices in Hindu-caste societies, and assist them in the reconstruction of their support systems.

Chapter 2 of this paper discusses the theoretical implications of widows' support systems. This part largely follows the works of Lopata and her collaborators in analyzing widows' life situations in various communities in the United States, Canada, Vanuatu, India, Korea, Turkey, Iran, Israel, the Philippines, Australia, and China. Chapter 3 seeks to adapt this concept to widows in Nepal while discussing especially the peculiarities of the family and of women's and widows' situation in the Nepalese Hindu caste society in contrast with other forms of the patriarchal family. It also deals with the idiosyncrasies of local society in rural Nepal. In section 3.1, I will also seek to give a more differentiated understanding of customary practices in Hindu caste society, which are based on the Hindu religious concepts of purity and pollution. This section also discusses the impact of the complicated relationships between caste, socio-economic class, and gender on these customary practices. Section 3.2 provides a general overview of the situation of widows in Nepal, and also includes a note on previous research on widows in Nepalese Hindu caste society.

Chapter 4 analyzes the development of widows' support systems based on my fieldwork in rural Nepal in 2016, 2017, and 2018. It focuses on the processes of the initial collapse of the support systems after the death of the husband and their subsequent reconstruction, in which the NGO plays an important role. A first summary of the results of my fieldwork on widows in Nepal was published in *Gender Studies* No. 22 (February 2020) under the title "Widows in Nepalese Society: A Case Study of Four Rural Areas"². A second paper that focuses especially on the role of NGOs in the improvement of widows' life situation in Nepal is currently in peer review. Similar to these previous papers, this paper is also based on qualitative interviews with widows and other material which I collected during my field work.

2. Widows' Support Systems

The concept of support systems has become a major theoretical tool for the analysis of widows' life since Lopata's groundbreaking research on widows in Chicago (Lopata 1973). During her research of the situation of widows in different ethnic communities in Chicago, Lopata noticed important differences in the support systems of these widows. Lopata then started to look thoroughly into widows' support systems with a large questionnaire survey of widows, again in Chicago, which resulted in a monumental publication on widows' support systems (Lopata 1979).³ Following Lopata's work, other social scientists took up the concept of support systems as a major approach to describe and analyze widows' life situation. Research from sociologists and cultural anthropologists executed in the Middle East (Israel, Turkey, Iran), Asia (India, the Philippines, Korea, China), the Pacific (Australia, Vanuatu), and North America (United States, Canada) resulted into two volumes of studies based on Lopata's concept of support systems (Lopata ed. 1987a and b).

Lopata defines supports and support systems in the following way: "A support is an action or an object which the society generally defines as necessary or helpful in maintaining a style of life of a category of its members. A support system is a set of similar supportive actions or objects involved in social interaction. A support network encompasses the people with whom

a person is involved in supportive interaction" (Lopata 1979: 4). She distinguishes four basic types of support system: economic, social, service,⁴ and emotional support systems. Based on the studies presented in Lopata ed. 1987a, Lopata noted in her introduction that cultural differences between the research locations and the impact of social change strongly affected the support systems.

Support systems are closely related to the resources which widows can access. In this regard, Lopata first distinguishes between resources that exist in the infrastructure of the social environment of the widows and widows' personal resources. She distinguishes three types of resources from which relations and support systems can be drawn: "The first set of resources available to a person contains all the attributes, abilities and skills of that particular individual... The ability to utilize community resources is based on habitual skills in behavior towards these different external resources developed during socialization and education at home and in school. A second set of resources is the current assets that facilitate social engagement thus as income and housing. A third set of resources includes all the people and groups with whom the person has an established relationship..." (Lopata 1979: 60-61).⁵

In my opinion, some further clarification of the concept of 'support systems' is necessary. I first want to distinguish between formal and informal support systems. Formal support systems are based on the system of social welfare in a country. Informal support systems, on the other hand, are based on the social networks in which women participate. This allows us to distinguish three types of social networks that might overlap, but do not necessarily do so: a) the network based on family and relatives⁶ b) the network of old and new friends and acquaintances, and c) local society⁷.

In most societies the family provides the most important network for the support of widows. A woman's relationship with her family is established either through her birth or through marriage. Marriage is a public celebration in the modern world which is controlled by family, clan, and society in order to ensure social prestige, economic gain, and political power (Goody 2000; Mitterauer and Sieder 1982: 122). In most patriarchal societies, marriage practices are either neolocal, which means that the newly-wed couple establishes its own household, or patrilocal, which means that the bride has to leave the family where she was born and become a member of her husband's household. In many patriarchal societies, a woman is never accepted as a full member of her family, despite the high veneration of consanguineous relationships (Bennett 1983:165), and only marriage provides her social status and identity, but in a way which is completely dependent upon her husband (Kondos 2004). But besides being subjected to the authority and control of her father before marriage, and to that of her father-in-law and her husband after marriage, there exists no uniform set of family practices in patriarchal societies.

The status of the wife or the bride varies a lot in traditional and modern families from different patriarchal cultures. But from Lopata's overview of support systems for widows in different cultures (Lopata 1987: 11-23), it becomes clear that in traditional patriarchal societies with extended family systems and patrilocal marriage practices, widows' support systems differ considerably according to the position of the widow within the household before her husband dies. Having become a mother-in-law shielded the widow from losing her support system upon the death of her husband, while the young wife who was still placed under the authority of her

mother-in-law became very vulnerable. But as Lopata also made clear in her discussion, there exist considerable cultural differences among patriarchal societies, and social change has been a major factor in the erosion of traditional support systems for widows.

Judging from Lopata's description of the support systems and resources in her survey on the widows in Chicago from the mid-1970s, another factor that affect widows' support systems and resources is the age of the widow at the time of her husband's death. This is especially true for the size of the network of family and relatives providing support for the widow. Age decides whether there exist surviving parents, siblings and in-laws, adult children, grand-children, cousins, nephews and nieces.⁸ But age, or perhaps generation, also influenced other resources, like the education level and the skills of the widows or the amount of property accumulated during marriage and accrued social security benefits (Lopata 1979: 60-72).

3. Widows' Situation and Support Systems in Rural Nepal

3.1 *The Situation of Nepalese Women in Society and the Family*

According to the 2011 Population Census of Nepal, the country had a total population of 26,494,504, which was composed of 48.5% men and 51.5% women (Central Bureau of Statistics, Government of Nepal 2012: Table 12).⁹ Nepal is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and multi-religious society. There existed 123 languages in 2011; Nepali was spoken as a mother-tongue by 44.6% and Maitili by 11.7% of the population, and any other lingual group amounted to less than 6% of the population. The majority of the population (81.3%) identified as Hindu, Buddhists accounted for 9% and Muslims 4.4%; the remaining 4.3% believed in other religions (Central Bureau of Statistics, Government of Nepal 2012: 4).

Nepal is a Hindu dominated patriarchal country, where men hold the superior position in both the family and society (Bennett 1983; Kondos 2004). Subjugation of girls and women is perceived as a natural phenomenon, the results of which can be seen in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report (2018), according to which Nepal holds the 105th position among 149 countries in four different fields (i.e. economy, education, politics and health) where women are placed at extremely low positions compared to other countries.¹⁰

If we want to discuss the situation of women in Nepal, we must first point to the differences between those who belong to the Hindu caste society and those who do not. Since most reports concerning women in Nepal are based on stereotypes concerning Hindu patriarchal society, which do not correctly understand the Nepalese practices of caste and of the position of women in a caste society, it is necessary to go into more detail concerning this question. As Brunson 2016 (loc. 556-889) has discussed in depth, the practices of caste, socio-economic class, and gender are closely intertwined with each other on the micro level in ways that defy universal categories of caste, class, and gender based on quantitative analysis at the macro level, in which culturally defined variations disappear. My discussion here is limited to that part of Nepalese society which can be defined as belonging to the Hindu-caste society.

The enormous variety and differences of caste and gender practices that can be observed in South Asian societies has caused a rich debate about the meaning of caste and gender in each of the South Asian Hindu-caste societies (cf. Brunson 2016: loc. 556-610). From this

discussion it becomes clear that in the everyday practices and customs of Nepalese Hindu-caste communities, caste cannot simply be treated as a category of social stratification similar to class. Socio-economic classes characterized by differences in the economic resources of the households co-exist and intersect with castes and are one element of social status in these communities, but they are by no means congruent with castes. High caste can be combined with high socio-economic class status, but it also can be combined with low socio-economic status in which both husband and wife are forced into gainful work in order to meet the needs of the household (cf. Brunson 2016: loc. 697-749). The same is true for low caste status, which can be combined with high or low socio-economic status. Central to the discussions about caste and gender in Nepal are Hindu beliefs about ritual purity and pollution of states of people, objects, and actions (cf. Cameron 1998: 7-9). Protecting a person's purity and avoiding impurity is a central concept of Hindu religious beliefs that dictates everyday practices and customs. High castes, Brahmin and Chhetri in the case of Nepal, are associated with purity, low castes (Dalit) and non-Caucasoid ethnic groups as well as non-Hindu people are associated with impurity. All women, on the other hand, are believed to be periodically impure and always in a danger of pollution.¹¹ Seen in this way, the position of women in Nepalese society is not simply a matter of a patriarchal social gender hierarchy based on the assumption of the superiority of men and the inferiority of women, but in Hindu-caste society it is closely intersected with religious beliefs concerning purity, impurity, and the avoidance of pollution, which have a strong impact on social customs and practices.

Next I want to discuss the family in Nepalese Hindu-caste society and the position of women within it. The ideal family in this society is a patriarchal and patrilocal multigenerational joint family with shared inheritance among the sons, and in which the sons remain part of the joint household after marriage and the birth of their children. The vast majority of contemporary Nepalese have experienced life in this kind of joint families, and it is still the preferred form of family life among the members of Hindu-caste society, irrespectively of their gender. Nevertheless, members frequently break away from their joint family to live in nuclear family households of a couple and their children, for reasons of the lack of economic resources to support the number of members of the joint family or because of frictions between its members (cf. Brunson 2016: loc. 902-908). Nevertheless, reverting to the form of a joint family after marriage of the sons still is a strong aspiration (cf. Brunson 2016: loc. 1298-1360). From the discussion in Brunson (2016: loc. 2287-2310) it becomes clear that the size and continuing existence of joint families is heavily dependent upon the economic resources of the household. Therefore, it is no wonder that the continuing existence of joint families over more than four generations is concentrated in the better-off socio-economic strata, while they tend to break up more rapidly among people at the bottom strata of affluence.¹²

Until revisions of the regulations concerning inheritance in the National Code of Nepal¹³ in 1997 and 2002, only male relatives were entitled to inherit property, but even after the inheritance rights of women were legally ascertained, customary practices allowing only men to inherit continued, and cases where the joint household tries to prevent widows from exercising their rights of inheriting their husbands' property are frequent.¹⁴ While the inherited shares of the sons are equal, their positions of authority in the household are not. The latter differ according to their order of birth.

The patriarchal joint family is organized by a hierarchy of authority. The ultimate position

of authority within a joint-family household resides with the oldest generation of its male members and from there moves down the line of male members according to the order of their birth. Women are basically subjected to male authority, but among them authority is decided first by their position of being a mother-in-law, a daughter of the household, or a daughter-in-law. Daughters-in-law are treated like servants, especially also by the daughters of the household. Their position in the household is decided by the birth order of their husband. Their position is ameliorated after they have given birth to a child, especially the birth of a son. The bottom of the hierarchy is occupied by the youngest (counted from the birth order of her husband and the date of her marriage) daughter-in-law. In a certain sense women are never really considered as full members of a joint family. In their natal family, their existence is considered as that of a temporary guest until they leave for the family of their husband, in which they are also always considered to be outsiders, and their position in the family deteriorates completely if they become widows (cf. Brunson 2016: chapter 2). Hence we can identify three criteria for deciding the position of a person in the hierarchy of authority: gender, length of membership in the joint family (generation, age, order of birth, and order of marrying into the family), and consanguinity.

As I have discussed above, the position of women in the family of Hindu-caste society is first defined by their being perceived as dangerous and as potential sources of pollution. Possible pollution, of course, comes through the blood shed by menstruation and birth, but it also comes through sexual intercourse.¹⁵ Therefore the control of women's sexuality is a major agenda concerning the restrictions placed on women in the joint family (cf. Bennett 1983: 214). Women are not supposed to leave the house except for working in the fields or visiting the market, and they are not supposed to speak in public beyond the necessities of business, because this could be seen by seen as attempts for soliciting sexual relations by other members of the community; the preservation of the patriline's purity of descent is the duty of all members of the household (Bennett 1983: 125). Chastity and deference are the main aspects of behavior of daughters-in-law in the joint family when communicating with consanguineous members of the family and with their mothers-in-law (cf. Bennett 1983: 172-173; Brunson 2016: loc. 1064-1129).

3.1.1. Mothers-in-law, daughters-in-law, and daughters in the joint family

Under patrifocal¹⁶ ideology, deference is based on superiority of men over women and of old age over youth (Bennett 1983: 142). Thus the entry of a daughter-in-law who is new to the family not merely helps her mother-in-law to ameliorate her previous low position in the patrifocal family; she also gains power which she can exercise over the new bride. "Being the wife of the senior male in the family is the greatest source of prestige available for a woman in brahmin-chettri society – just as for men the highest prestige is to be the senior male", (Bennett 1983 :186).

With her entry into the family, the daughter-in-law is expected to carry out all household chores that were previously performed by her mother-in-law. In the families observed in fieldwork, "daughters-in-law are, even now, expected to greet their *sasu*¹⁷ by touching their foreheads to her feet. They must also drink the water from washing their *sasu's* feet before each meal, ask if they may wash her clothes, and rub oil on her feet at night" (Bennett 1983: 180).

Bennett's research shows that possessing a pleasant and subservient demeanor and producing a male heir for the husband's family helps the bride to secure her position in the new family (Bennett 1983: 202). Bennett describes the tensions and conflicts that occurred between a mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law in daily life, which motivated the daughter-in-law to urge her husband to separate from the joint family (Bennett 1983: 182-185). However, one of Bennett's informants talked about her harmonious and supportive relationship with her mother-in-law who criticized her son for marrying a second wife.¹⁸

As Brunson's (2016) research shows, in rural joint families the daughters-in-law were basically valued for two reasons: first, for producing sons that can perform the funeral rites in the Hindu religion; and second, to provide labor for agricultural and household work. The workloads of the daughters-in-law, even of those who married into the family at an age under sixteen, were described by her informants as very heavy, and they had to be on the beck and call to serve every whim of those positioned above them, including the young daughters of the family. This contrasts vividly with the treatment of the consanguineous daughters of the joint family.

The patrifocal ideology is complemented by a filiafocal¹⁹ ideology, where young virgin unmarried consanguine girls are worshipped as an incarnation of the goddess. During childhood, the female child receives higher deference than her male siblings (Bennett 1983). In brahmin-chhetri kinship groups, the sacredness of a consanguine female can be felt during a number of Hindu ceremonies and rituals for daughters and sisters (Bennett: 1983: 142). Brunson (2016: loc. 937-1129) describes the difference in the treatment of daughters in their native household and of daughters-in-law in their husbands' household. Daughters are treated indulgently; they have their tasks within the work of the household, but everybody makes sure that they are not overburdened. Their position among the women of the household is in principal higher than that of the daughters-in-law, who have to obey their wishes.²⁰ Daughter-in-laws are put to work in the household immediately after entering the family without much concern for age or physical strength, and they are also treated as servants by the daughters. Brunson describes the shock experienced by thirteen- or fourteen-year-old brides upon being forced to leave the protected and comfortable situation within their native household and move into a life among strangers, being forced to hard and unaccustomed work, and to eat strange food.

If we discuss the situation of women in Nepal, I have to address one more point before discussing the situation of widows: child marriages, especially child brides. In the Population Census of Nepal 2011 (table 19), there were 1,501,123 persons who were married under the age of fifteen, which constituted 11.3% of people ever married. The vast majority (81.1%) of the people married as children were women. In Hindu caste society, the marriage of a girl that has not yet had her first menstruation is considered auspicious, because her higher state of purity is protecting her new family from pollution (and her age facilitates the control of her sexuality) (cf. Bennett 1983). Most of the women interviewed by Brunson (2016) were married between thirteen and fifteen years of age, but the census data show that 16.3% of the Nepalese women ever married were married under fifteen years of age, and 115,150 of them were married under the age of ten²¹. An important point is that once a girl is married and enters her husband's household, her school attendance stops. This is one reason for the considerably lower literacy rate of Nepalese women.²²

3.2. *Widows in Nepal*

According to the National Census of 2011, there existed 498,606 widows in 2011 (Central Bureau of Statistics, Government of Nepal 2012: Table 18, p. 127).²³ The number of widows received a considerable boost due to the earthquake of 2015. The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic is yet unknown.

The situation of widows in Nepali Hindu-caste society is defined by customary practices that are supposed to be based on Hindu religious doctrine, especially the *Manusmriti*, in which the widow's fate is perceived as retribution for crimes in a prior life. The excerpts from the *Manusmriti* cited by Ramabai (1888) especially include proscriptions concerning their being deprived of gold and other valuables, prohibition of bright colored garments, enforced shaved hair, coarse white or brown garments, prohibition of more than one meal per day, and prohibition of her participation in family, religious, and social events. The proscriptions of the *Manusmriti* were originally limited to widows of the highest castes, but due to the proliferation of the text by the colonial authorities in the late 19th century, the text became a source for general customary practices, not only in India but also in Nepal.²⁴ The treatment of widows in contemporary Nepalese Hindu-caste society is indeed very harsh. Widows are basically excluded from participation in the family, religious events and local society, hence they are more or less socially isolated and cut off from any support networks, and additionally they are subjected to various restrictions and discriminatory practices. Research on widows in Nepal and India stress the following problems that widows face in Hindu-caste society:

- a) Pervasive social-cultural mores and religious dictums: Cultural symbolism and religious ideology regularly forbid a proper diet for widows, colorful garments, or social mobility, and demand a docile demeanor (Thapa 2020; Thapa 2012). Widows are frequently excluded from the front line during religious and auspicious events (Thapa 2020), which results in social isolation (Houston et al. 2016). To avoid all these social and cultural hurdles, some widows convert to Christianity (Galvin 2005). Not surprisingly, upper caste Hindu widows endure harsher treatment than lower caste widows (Galvin 2005: 65, 67).
- b) Breakdown of kinship and other social networks: The death of the husband does not merely shift the identity of a woman from wife to widow, but it also redefines her positions concerning both old and new relations. Widows experience a breakdown in family and kinship relations and social relationships (Galvin 2005; Sabri et al. 2016; Thapa 2012: 8-9; Thapa 2020:127-129). Since young widow's sexuality appears as a menace inside and outside of the family (Chakravarti 1995) they are excluded from social gatherings and events (Thapa 2020; Lenette 2014: 12; Dahal 2007: 65).
- c) Domestic violence: Widows experience verbal and physical violence within and outside of their household. They are psychologically taunted as being responsible for the death of their husbands (Thapa 2020: 127-129, 136; Sabri et al. 2016). According to the Nepal Demographic and Health Survey (Ministry of Health 2017: 348), forty-six percent of divorced and separated women and widows have experienced domestic violence compared to twenty-five percent of the married women with husbands and 5.5 percent of the unmarried women. Troubled relations with their in-laws compel widows to take shelter in a new locality (Habazaki 2009: 177-178) or shift their residence (Galvin 2005). If widows

are lucky enough, they receive support from their natal family (Thapa 2020).

- d) Illiteracy: A widow's situation is largely determined by the state of their literacy and income. According to the National Census of 2011, the average literacy rate of widows²⁵ is only 11.01%, which is far below the national average female literacy rate of 57.45% (Women for Human Rights 2011: 10). Data collected by WHR in 2010 among 41,530 widows from 54 districts of Nepal revealed that 67% of the widows could not read and write (Women for Human Rights 2010: 28, 31).
- e) Pauperization: The death of the husband forces widows to take sole economic responsibility for themselves and their children, which forces them to devote most of their time to work.²⁶ According to the Nepal Demographic and Health Survey 2006 (Ministry of Health 2007), 32.9 percent of widows contribute their earnings to the household expenditure in comparison to 18.1 percent in the case of married women. Besides, "property grabbing" and "being chased-off" are common experiences of widows (United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women 2001; Galvin 2005; Thapa 2020; Sabri 2016), including the seizure of monetary assets such as widow allowances and accident insurance (Thapa 2020:127-128). However, some widows have their property transferred voluntarily to their in-laws or hesitate to claim it in order to avoid trouble with their in-laws (Poon et al. 2016: 402)

3.2.1. A Note on Previous Literature on Widows in Nepalese Hindu Caste Society

While quite a body of research and literature on women in Nepalese society has accumulated since the 1980s,²⁷ literature on widows in Hindu-caste society is still limited and it mostly focuses on India, although its tenor has changed considerably since the 1980s.²⁸

After the end of the civil war, widow issues in Nepal gained the attention of Nepalese and foreign scholars who were interested in specific problems that accompanied the building of a new society. The problem of war widows and their children was addressed by Chhetri (2007). Dahal (2007), Houston et al. (2016), Surkan et al. (2014), and Hendrickson et al. (2017) were interested in health and psychological issues of widows, especially of widows who had been victims of the war. Alexander and Reiger (2011) and Sabri et al. (2016) concentrated on widows from violence and conflicts. Economic hardship was the topic of Ramnarain (2016) and Poon et al. (2016). Galvin (2005) and Habazaki (2009) were especially interested in resilience and coping strategies. Habazaki's research was centered on women's empowerment and the organizations promoting it, but she also published on widows in Nepal. Habazaki 2013 and 幅崎 (2015) dealt with Nepalese widows in the context of participation in collective action through NGOs and in this regard also gave a more general account of the life of Nepalese widows, focusing especially on the effect of NGO activities on widows' lives. Very little of the literature reviewed touches on widows' support systems in contemporary Nepal.

4. A Case Study of Widows' Support Systems in Rural Nepal

4.1 Details of Field Work

During my preliminary research about the situation of women and widows in Nepal, it

became clear that empirical research was to a great degree concentrated on the Kathmandu valley, which simply does not represent the whole of Nepal. Geographical features, ethnicity, language and culture vary to a high degree within the country. Kathmandu City and its surroundings is the area in which the impact of modernization and globalization has advanced the most in Nepal. Widows' circumstances of life in this area differ from those of widows living in other regions, which can be ascertained by a closer look at the tables of the National Census and the Population and Health Reports. Second, when I went to Nepal for my preliminary field work in 2016, the country underwent a huge political turmoil and disturbance. Particularly, the southern regions of Nepal were heavily affected by political violence and chaos resulting in a collapse of public safety. Concerns for safety, not only for myself but especially for my informants who belong to a discriminated and vulnerable social group, caused me to choose Chitawan Province in the south-eastern central region, which was relatively unaffected by these disturbances, as the area of my field work.

In all three periods of field work the informants were selected through cooperation with the NGO Women for Human Rights – Single Women Group (WHR). In the preliminary field work in 2016 I used group discussions with about sixty widows (there was some fluctuation between the sessions) for gaining basic information about their life and the challenges they face, in order to develop more systematic questions for in-depth interviews with the informants. The group consisted of widows from the villages of Parbatipur, Sibanagar, Gunjanagar, and Mangalpur. The group discussions were video-taped and later transcribed in Nepali, English, and Japanese. In my field work in 2017 and 2018, I opted for a qualitative research method of in-depth interviews in order to have face to face interaction with my informants. It was most important to me to assure the comfort of the informants during the interviews in order to acquire a wider range of possible responses and information. This was possible, since the in-depth interview were of a free-flowing type in which the informants were allowed to express their views freely without any interruption. The first wave of interviews was conducted in October 2017 with thirty-two informants from Parbatipur and Sibanagar. The second wave of interviews was conducted in November 2018 with eighteen informants from Gunjanagar and Dibyanagar.²⁹ In both waves, the interviews took two to three hours for each informant. I had prepared the part of the questionnaires that concerned socio-demographic information of the informants in a semi-structured format, while the part of the questions dealing with the informants' life situation had an unstructured format. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed into English and Japanese. Pictures and videos of the informants were taken with their consent. To ensure their convenience and time, transportation costs were paid.

4.2. The Development of Support Systems of the Widows

4.2.1. *The Collapse of Social Networks and Support Systems after the Death of the Husband*

Before proceeding with an analysis of the interviews, I have to state that not all widows are the same. While reviewing the interviews for a former paper (Thapa 2020), a pattern of clear differences in the life situation of the widows according to their age at the time of the death of their husband became apparent. In the following analysis I will refer to this pattern in distinguishing between young, middle-aged, and old-aged widows.³⁰ I also have to note that the life course of the widows continues after the death of their husbands, and this also implies changes in their life situation.

Lopata (1979: 3) states that almost all widows experienced a crisis in social and support networks and in their emotional and psychological state in the immediate period after the death of their husband that made it difficult for them to deal with their new situation. This fact can also be observed in the interviews with my informants.

In the case of my informants their relations with family and kin and non-kin social networks differed according to their age at the time of the death of their husband. Most of the young widows were still living with their husbands' joint families and basically had no social relations outside of the household. Their relations with members of their natal households depended on the distance between the location of the joint families and the location of their natal household. Anyway, the relations of married women with their natal households changed over time. Especially, relations with their mothers were quite strong, because of the custom of returning to their natal household for the final stage of their pregnancy, birth of the child, and the initial period after child birth. But the relations became thinner over time, especially if the distance to their native family was far. Since daughters-in-law are supposed not to freely leave their household and visit people outside, in general the degree of the bonds with their natal families became weaker over time. Exceptions are cases in which the natal household resides in the same community as the husband's joint family. Most of the middle-aged and old-aged widows were living in nuclear family households with their husband and unmarried children; they kept kinship relations with the joint-family of their husbands as well as with their natal family, and they also were involved in friendship relations that were centered on their husbands. But it has to be noted that with rising age the relations with the husband's and natal kin also grew weaker, because under the general conditions of high mortality and low life expectancy the death of parents and older siblings reduced the number of intimate relationships (cf. Thapa 2020).

In the case of all of my informants the death of the husband had severe consequences for the social networks of the widows. In the case of young widows living with the joint family of their husbands, they became isolated within the joint family and local society. Only in the case where their natal households lived in the same community did they receive support from their natal kinship network. In the case of middle-aged widows living in nuclear family households, the already weak relations with relatives from the husband's joint family came more or less to an end; relations with the kinship network of their natal families remained functional only when they were living in close location to themselves and when close relatives still survived; social-networks with friends and acquaintances basically came to a halt after the husband's funeral, because they had been centered on the husband, not on his wife. In the case of old-aged widows the relations with both the husband's family and their own natal family had already grown very thin because of the prior deaths of close relatives; for non-kin social networks the same development applied as in the case of the middle-aged widows. In the cases of both middle-aged and old-aged widows their own children were the only functional support group of the widows, but one that depended on the age and gender of the children to determine the type and extent of that support (cf. Thapa 2020). Traditionally, sons have the duty to support their old parents, but that duty is not always performed sufficiently as the following case of a middle-aged widow who lived in a nuclear household before the death of her husband shows.

- I have two sons. But every six months I have to rotate between their households. It is not because they care and love me, the reason is different. Actually, I am burden to them. One of my son and his family live in Nepal and

the other is working in a foreign country, but his family lives in the same village as me. When I stay with his family and my son calls from the foreign country, he never talks to me and never asks about my health condition. My daughter-in-law treats me like an outsider. My daughter-in-law and grandchildren are really harsh on me. My son does not scold them for mistreating me. Although I help them in their farm work and kitchen work, I am never appreciated. I even wash my plate after I finish my meal. I feel so sad in my heart (BI, 71, Brahmin, adult school, middle-aged widow).³¹

A severe consequence of the collapse of social networks after the death of the husband is the isolation of the widows, which leads to psychological and emotional problems. The problem of the social isolation that widows experience after the death of the husbands has been reported from many cultures, for instance Lopata (1979) for Chicago, Owen (1996) for widows worldwide, Birech (2012) for Nairobi, Kenya, Galvin (2006) for urban areas of Nepal, and Thapa (2012) for Nepal in general. It seems to be a general problem for widows. But if we consider the information from the U.S. and Europe, in advanced societies it seems to be a problem that can easily become severe for older widows who start to live alone in highly urbanized environments with poor human relationships in the neighborhood, but it is a problem that has much less probability to become severe in rural communities or urban environments with vibrant neighborhood communities. In Nepal, the problem is aggravated because of the customary shunning of widows in Hindu local societies and the customary isolation of the widows from the outside world in joint families. Most of my own informants reported being shunned by local society and also talked about their feelings of isolation and loneliness after the death of their husband.

- I lost my husband when I was twenty-five years old. Before the death of my husband, I was treated as very special and important. After his death, the relatives of my husband's joint household started to ignore me, and blamed me for the death of their son. They haunted me psychologically. My brothers-in-law repeatedly accused me of planning to steal the property inheritance from the household... I lost my confidence, I always cried, without confidence nothing was left but crying. It was a very dreadful life (AK, 40, Brahmin, School Leaving Certificate, young widow).
- I was thirty when I lost my husband. We lived together in one room with our two sons, and did tailoring work there together. Immediately after my husband died, the landlord rudely told me to leave the house with my children. The neighbors persistently blamed me to be untouchable (*dalit*), practicing witchcraft, and longing for other men, refused any contact with us and pressured us to leave the neighborhood (AV, 59, Dalit, illiterate, young widow).

These two cases are examples that are typical for the discriminatory treatment of widows by their husbands' joint families and in local society. But at the same time they also reveal that other motives than concern for the protection of the household's or the local society's purity are also at play in the treatment of widows. The first case clearly shows that the possibility of the widow's inheritance of her husband's property and its prevention was a major concern of the men of the joint household in their treatment of the widow. The second case is more difficult, but it is clear that the treatment of the widow overlapped with social discrimination against the low, untouchable *Dalit* caste.

A special problem for the widows who had had no prior experience in dealing with the world outside of the household was confrontation with their new situation of being solely

responsible for the household, business matters, and dealing with the authorities without help.

- Before his death, my husband took care of all financial household matters. After his death, I had to go and pay the electric bills at the Electrical Authority City Office for the first time in life, and I was very confused and did not know where to do it, and I had to ask a lot of people until I found the right place (AJ, 47, Brahmin, incomplete primary education, middle-aged widow).
- Before my husband's death, I was a housewife. My husband had cancer. Actually he was working in the Nepal Police Force. The Maoist revolution was at its height at that time, so we asked him to resign the job but it was not easy. But one day he came home and never returned back to his job. He was diagnosed with cancer. It was very hard to manage home and household alone. We were confronted with financial difficulties. In-laws did not help at all. Shortly after my husband's death, one of my close native relatives asked one of his friends to hire me. Luckily I got the job and joined an office of the Nepal Electric City Authority. Now I earn nearly 16,000 Nepali rupees a month. I am household head and I have sons studying at school. (AU, 40, Brahmin, incomplete secondary education, young widow).

The two cases cited above show typical problems for widows who lived in nuclear households with their husbands and children before the husband's death. Dealing with matters that involve the outside world was the husband's task, and the wives only had very rudimentary knowledge of what was involved with these tasks. The problems the widows faced were significantly aggravated when they were illiterate and had no skills to acquire necessary information. Another problem occurred when the widows had to hire male help for repairs etc., because contact with non-kin men led to gossip and suspected illicit sexual relations, which sometimes also increased the discrimination and isolation of the widows in their neighborhood.

4.2.2. The Resources of Widows

Following Lopata (1979: 60-61), we can first distinguish between infrastructural resources and personal resources. In this chapter, I will basically concentrate on the personal resources of widows, because as can be seen in Lopata (1979) and also in her discussion of the differences between various countries in Lopata (1987), infrastructural resources mainly include social welfare systems, public transport systems, and semi-public charity organizations. One important difference between Nepal and highly developed societies is the degree of the development of the formal support systems of social welfare, like universal health care and universal old age pension insurance that are very important concerning the economic resources of widows in highly developed societies. There exist differences between the highly developed countries, especially between Europe and Japan on one side and the United States on the other, but in all those countries the systems provided on the national level are additionally backed up by publicly and semi-publicly institutionalized support systems on the regional and local levels, by communities, charitable organizations, and, especially in Europe and the United States, by Christian churches. These kinds of public and semi-public systems of services and supports do only exist on a rudimentary level in the poor and underdeveloped country Nepal³², with the exception of NGOs that aim at support widows but which can by no means provide universal services and supports. Especially the institutions of Hindu religion and the local society do not provide support for widows; rather, the opposite is true.

We then can distinguish three types of personal resources: a) attributes, abilities and skills

of a particular individual, b) current assets that facilitate social engagement, such as property, income and housing, and c) all the people and groups with whom the person has an established relationship. I name these “resources of the self”, “economic resources”, and “social resources”.

4.2.2.1. Resources of the Self

This kind of resources start with the educational level of the widows. Of my fifty informants, twenty-two had no formal schooling, three had incomplete primary education, two had completed primary education, and sixteen had secondary education until class ten (school leaving certificate) or class twelve (prerequisite for post-secondary education)³³ at the time when they became widows. Twenty-four of the informants reported themselves as being illiterate at the start of their widowhood and twenty-one reported themselves as literate; five informants did not answer the question.³⁴ Actually, the number of widows who received some formal education is quite high among my informants, but literacy and formal education did not guarantee that the widows were actually able to mobilize these resources after the death of their husband. A number of my informants who had quite a good education complained that they had not been able to acquire and use the information that was necessary for dealing with the world outside of the household. Formal schooling did not prepare them for an independent life, especially if they had not interacted with the outside world for a prolonged time.

The majority of my informants were housewives before the death of their husband and had no work-related skills besides housework. Nevertheless, when the household was farming, mostly for own consumption, the daughters-in-law regularly had to engage in agricultural work. Some of my informants were also engaged in non-agricultural work, like informant AV cited above. The crucial point concerning work-related skills was not the caste of the informants but their socio-economic class position. As a rule, informants who lived in poor households were also gainfully employed and had contact with the world outside of the household.

Most of my informants from Hindu-caste society developed anxiety and inhibition when dealing with local society, religious institutions, and the authorities after the death of their husband. This kind of psychological disposition, which became an obstacle for taking care of their own life, is a fact that has not been reported in Lopata's research, but it is a factor which is very important among Nepalese widows, especially among widows of higher castes like Brahmin and Chhetri (cf. Tapa 2020). This negative psychological disposition is basically the result of the customary treatment of widows in the joint households and local society in Hindu-caste communities. Informants reported that they anticipated critique, scolding, and gossip in their social environment if they did not conform to the customs prescribed for widows, and tried to avoid the negative impact of this kind of admonishments. But in the long run this kind of reaction to their social environment created severe impediments to taking care of their own life.

4.2.2.2. Economic Resources

As a whole the economic resources of my informants are rather modest. Quite a number of my informants lived close to the poverty line, relying on income from day labor and seasonal labor, while the majority lived in relatively comfortable circumstances, in part based on support from their children living abroad. About half of my informants had not an exorbitant but more

or less a stable and safe source of income at the time of my interviews.

Twenty-seven of my informants reported ownership of the house in which they live and five informants reported joint ownership with their children. Two of my informants reported ownership rights concerning the rooms in which they live with the joint family. Three of the widows lived with relatives, and six informants gave no information concerning their living conditions. Thirty-five of my informants reported land ownership (including cases of joint ownership with their children), five of my respondents reported owning small vegetable gardens, and one reported that she owned mountain land that had no actual economic value at the time of interview. Two informants reported that they cultivated land but that the property rights actually belonged to their children. Seven informants of low socio-economic class status rented agricultural land from local landlords in a system of share-cropping, in which half of the produce goes to the landlord.

Five of my informants operated small shops (grocery, liquor, tailoring), and one informant engaged in the itinerant sale of sweets. One informant operated quite a big poultry farm, the only real business owned by any of my informants. One of my informants reported that she engaged in money-lending.

Thirty-eight of my respondents reported the receipt of widow allowances and seven reported the old-age pension.³⁵ The husband of one of my informants died from a work accident in Saudi Arabia and received insurance payments from his work contract.

Ownership of housing and land does not guarantee a comfortable life, because agricultural production necessitates other resources beyond labor and land. Six of my informants reported themselves as living in highly comfortable conditions, fourteen were comfortable, eleven reported that their situation was below comfortability, and seventeen lived in complete poverty; two of the old-aged widows have health problems and are completely dependent upon their children.

4.2.2.3. Social Resources

Social resources are defined as all the people and groups with whom the person has an established relationship, and who can become a source of help and support. I have already discussed the collapse of the social networks of the widows after the death of their husband. But if we look at the material from my interviews, we can distinguish basically three groups of social relations from which the widows can draw certain support. These three groups are the own children of the widows, relatives from their natal families, and relatives from their deceased husbands' families. We also can identify two areas in which support from any of these groups have occurred. These areas are emotional support and financial support.

Own children as social resources clearly depend on the age of the children and the age of the widow at the time of the death of their fathers. The majority of the young widows only had small children up to age twelve and below. The older children of this age can contribute help in the household, but are still too young for gainful work. Nevertheless, we should not ignore the emotional support that comes from small children as they constitute a focus for parental love. Caring for one's own small children also forces the widow to deal with her situation and

to overcome her despair. Many of the children of middle-aged widows helped in the household and with their younger siblings as soon as they were able to do so, and some also left school early and started gainful work in order to support their widowed mothers and younger siblings. Children also provided emotional support. In the case of old-age widows their children were already living in their own households. A number of them provided financial support to their mother, and especially daughters also provided emotional support. In four cases, one of them a middle-aged widow, daughters left their own household in order to live with and support their mothers. But relations with their own children was not always without friction and problems, as the case of Ms. BC cited above and three of the cases cited below show. We also have to acknowledge that in several cases the adult children lived in foreign countries and provided financial support to their mother from there. Twenty of my informants received financial support from their own children.

- Currently, I am staying with my daughter and son. My daughter-in-law eloped with another man leaving her daughter behind with me. My son went to Malaysia with a working visa. But now we have lost contact with him, and I feel sad. So my daughter came to my place to live together with me and my granddaughter. Her income has helped us to survive. My only granddaughter from my son's side is still young (BE, 64, Dalit, illiterate, middle-aged widow).
- Currently, I am working as a volunteer at the health office. I have one son and one daughter. My son and his family live in Belgium. My son remits money from Belgium for my livelihood. He is really kind. He often calls me on the phone. I am alone at home so my daughter and her family moved to my house. My daughter takes care of me (AH, 65, Janajati, incomplete secondary education, middle-aged widow).
- My daughter and granddaughter take care of me. My son and his family live in the United States of America. He earns a lot but never sends me money. My married daughter and granddaughter moved to my place to help me. My daughter and her husband had problems in their relationship so she moved in with me alone with her daughter. I have psychological and health problems. I am aging and have to take medicine regularly (BD, 77, Brahmin, illiterate, middle-aged widow).
- My daughter is now working in a factory, actually she was very fond of studying. Due to the lack of sufficient money, she could not continue school, so she started to work. Now we manage our livelihood from her monthly salary (BB, 47, Janajati, incomplete secondary education, middle-aged widow).

The first three cases above show two important aspects of social change. The first aspect is related to international migration, which has increased considerably since the 2000s and which comprises labor migration as well as educational migration. Educational migration is normally thought to be a temporary form of migration, but it often leads to accepting job offers in the host country after graduation and to more permanent residence in a foreign country. Sons who acquire permanent employment in their host countries and earn good money are able to support their old parents and other family members in Nepal financially, and many do so. But residing abroad also gives sons easy opportunities to shed their responsibilities towards their old parents. And here we see a second aspect of social change emerging; daughters increasingly appearing as care-givers to their widowed mothers when sons fail to commit to their responsibilities.

In my discussion at this point, I would have liked not to focus on the current situation of

the widows but on their situation in the period immediately after the death of their husbands. Nevertheless, it is sometimes impossible to reconstruct the widows' relationship with her children at the time of the death of the husband from the interviews. All of the widows I interviewed have experienced a more or less prolonged period of their life course in widowhood, and not only are memories of their past and their current situation often mixed up, they also report their relationships with their children in a processual way. For instance, if we look at the case of BD cited above, she became a widow at the age of fifty-six and had been a widow for twenty-one years at the time of our interview. Additional information that was related to me by her daughter made clear that the mother and the siblings of the son who lives in the U.S. had made considerable sacrifices to allow him to become well educated and land a good job after university, and that the siblings are rather disappointed with his lack of shouldering his responsibilities towards his mother and siblings.

The fourth case cited above shows which sacrifices young children have to make when the economic situation of the household of the widow and her children is precarious. I have several cases in which the children quit school early and started to work gainfully, either because the financial situation of the household did not allow the family to shoulder the costs of secondary education or because the children wanted to add their income to support their mother. It should also be noted that the premature ending of a child's education also is an important factor for the reproduction of a precarious life course.

Support from relatives from their natal family was limited to young widows with small children, which mostly received financial help from their natal households. In total, fifteen of my informants reported financial help from their natal family; five of them particularly named brothers. The natal families also provided emotional support to the young widows. In a few cases in which the young widows were heavily abused in the joint family of their deceased husbands, they were given refuge by their natal families and allowed to return to the natal household (cf. Thapa 2020: 137-138). In general, support from relatives from the natal household was subjected to the limitations already discussed above.

I have stated that in general support from relatives from their deceased husbands' families was rare; nevertheless, five of my informants reported to have received financial help from their husbands' families, which in four cases was limited to help in the immediate period until the husband's funeral. Only one case, in which the young widow was born and raised in the same community as her husband, was exceptional. This widow reported continuing good relations not only with her natal family but also with her deceased husband's family and within local society.

4.2.3. The Rebuilding of Social Networks and Support Systems: The Role of NGOs

All of my informants became members of the NGO Women for Human Rights – Single Women Group (WHR) in the course of their widowhood. Membership in this NGO played an important part in the rebuilding of these widows' support systems. But I have to make a caveat here. Only about 20% of Nepalese widows have access to an NGO that deals especially with widows' problems and gives help and support. Many of these widows continue to live in dismal conditions, and it is almost impossible to gain access to them for research.

My informants reported the following areas in which participation in the NGO had a decisive impact on their life situation: 1) Building awareness and knowledge concerning their own life situation and their discrimination within Hindu-caste society; 2) rebuilding of self-confidence; 3) enabling communication with other widows concerning their experiences and rebuilding social networks among them; and 4) providing access to information and opportunities for training and learning. However, the NGO also provides help in dealing with bureaucracies, especially for the acquisition of citizenship certificates and identity proof, organizing a savings and credit union, providing loans for establishing self-sustaining businesses, helping with the application for and even providing scholarships for children of the widows, etc. All of these areas are important factors in the redevelopment of social networks and support systems, but in this paper I will focus on two of these areas, namely the rebuilding of self-confidence and social networks. The following cases show the rebuilding of widows' self-confidence and of new social relationships.

- We participated for the first time in a workshop for widows in Kathmandu. After we returned home, we organized a widows' group in our region in Chitawan. When I remember now, we all started to weep when we participated for the first time in the workshop for widows. Even now I cannot forget how we started to weep when we heard the founder of WHR, Miss Lily's presentation at the workshop. Nowadays I have been elected to the temple committee, and my self-confidence has greatly improved compared to before I became a member of WHR. Now I have no fear in public. Four, five years ago a big ceremony for the gods was performed in our village. At that time the priest forbade the widows to come to the frontline and participate in the ceremony. I went to the front and had a big dispute with the priest (AC, 40, Brahmin, undergraduate student in university, young widow).
- I lost my self-confidence the moment my husband died. I always wept. I had no confidence and the only thing left was weeping. It was a very dreadful time. My life changed after I joined WHR. My way of thinking changed and I started to understand that it was my human right to live a fulfilling life in happiness. Now I can give advice to other widows with confidence (AK, 40, Brahmin, School Leaving Certificate, young widow).
- After I became a member of WHR, I developed self-confidence. WHR became the place to meet new people and to share our feelings. In the past, talking with other people was scary. Compared to before, now I have become able to speak, and even to negotiate. (BB, 47, Janajati, incomplete secondary education, middle-aged widow).
- When I participated in events, I made many new friends among the widows. Thus my network enlarged and the number of my relationships with people on whom I can rely when I am in trouble increased. I am happier than before. (AO, 63, Brahmin, illiterate, middle-aged widow).

As we can see, the participation in events of the NGO led to a rebuilding of the self-confidence of the widows, which was accompanied by a reduction of anxiety that had become an impediment for dealing with other people. This process was crucial for the widows in establishing new social relations and in becoming able to deal with their social environment. Participation in activities with other widows and sharing their own life experiences with them had a cathartic effect on widows who were lost in grief and anxiety. One can even say that the widows developed new identities of being a widow and a member of WHR that transcend caste differences. At the same time, the interaction with other widows helped them to build new social relationships and to rebuild their social networks and support systems. Other widows did become friends and confidants on whom the widow can rely for advice, help, and other support.

Although my focus here is the initial effect of the participation in the NGO in the process of rebuilding the widows' self-confidence and social networks, I would like to add four more cases that illustrate the importance of the NGO's other support for the widows.

- I became a widow at the age of 39. I cannot read and write. That's why I have no steady job. I work as a daily wage laborer and earn money on a daily basis. I am the only breadwinner of my family. I have two daughters. Both are bright at study. Unfortunately, I do not have sufficient money to send them to a private school. It is sometimes difficult to manage money for their additional remedial classes. But the best part is my two daughters receive scholarships, one from the widow NGO, and one from a privately sponsor (AA, 47, Chhetri, illiterate, middle-aged widow).

This case shows that the NGO also tries to help mothers without means to give their children an education. However, the funds of the NGO are limited and it has to limit such support to highly gifted children and only cover part of the expenses, but the NGO also introduces other sponsors and helps with additional applications.

- When my husband was alive I did not realize the importance of the citizenship certificate. But I needed it after his death in order to claim the monthly widow allowances provided by the government. I am illiterate, and I did not have any idea about dealing with the official applications and documents that are required to be submitted. So sisters working at WHR helped me to prepare all the required papers (AA, 47, Chhetri, illiterate, middle-aged widow).

This case show how the support of other members of the NGO becomes important for widows who lack the basic skills for dealing with bureaucracies and paperwork. The citizenship certificate and the citizenship card are very important to prove a widow's identity; they are similar to ID cards in developed countries. Since female births and marriages are not universally registered in Nepal, widows without a citizenship certificate have to apply for them with the local administration. This process sometimes is more difficult than simple help with the paperwork of illiterate widows, because sometimes additional testimony has to be provided by the deceased husband's joint family and is withheld, especially if questions of inheritance or pensions from foreign countries are involved. In these cases, the support of the NGO has to be more forceful.

- Now, my self-confidence has improved. And because I became a member of the savings and credit program of the NGO, I put every month money into my savings. When I have money troubles, I can borrow from the NGO. Now my life is much happier than before. To help me to stabilize my life, I received goats as economic support from the NGO, and as the number of goats increases, I sell them (AN, 40, Chhetri, adult education).

Goat meat has become the most luxurious food item in Nepal, and raising goats is much easier than other kinds of husbandry. But what is important here is economic support on the micro level which aims at a sustainable business and the economic independence and self-reliability of the widow. This kind of economic support is normally provided through the savings and credit unions, which are themselves an example of self-help on the micro level.

5. Conclusion

Widowhood is a global phenomenon, and widows around the world share many

experiences, and some of them are also shared by widowers. Nevertheless, widowhood has not gained much scholarly attention, neither in family studies nor in gender studies. Widows and widowers share the experience of loss and grief, but the social impact of losing a spouse is quite different. In general, widowers do not experience the same collapse of social networks and support systems as widows. The reason for this is the gendered nature of social and economic relations in patriarchal societies. But patriarchal societies are not all the same around the globe and through the ages. They differ due to various socio-cultural factors.

The concept of support systems, which was developed by Lopata and her collaborators in the 1970s and 1980s, is a useful and effective theoretical tool for analyzing the life situation of widows and its changes in the course of time, but as the studies in Lopata (ed. 1987a and b) show, the content and structure of these support systems are heavily influenced by socio-cultural factors and by social change. Therefore, it is important to understand the impact of these factors on the micro level of social and cultural customs and gender relations. These factors are less structural and more processual in nature. For example, in Lopata's research on widows in Chicago in the 1970s, the majority of the elderly widows lost an important part of their mobility with the death of their husband: the car. American women of their generation were not supposed to be able to drive and have a driver's license: driving the car was a man's responsibility (and the same is true for European and Japanese women of the same generation). This had an important effect on the life situation of widows, especially of those who lived outside urban centers with highly developed systems of public transport. In most highly developed countries the situation has changed, and women without drivers' licenses have become as rare as men without them. A lot of the processes of social change operate on the micro level of socio-cultural customs, and the same is true for Nepal.

Socio-cultural customs concerning gender relations in Nepalese Hindu-caste society have many peculiarities compared to other patriarchal societies, and therefore it is necessary to explore the cultural basis for these customs and to understand their fluidity. As Brunson's (2016) longitudinal cultural-anthropological study, which consisted of more than ten years of recurrent field-work, shows, the gender-related customs in Nepalese Hindu-caste communities are not static, they are influenced by structural changes on the macro level and also by learning experiences on the micro level. Nevertheless, these customs, which are based on concepts of (ritual) purity and pollution, still define the situation of women in the family and in local society. They are also the major factor that determines the deprived and vulnerable position of widows in Hindu-caste communities (I have two cases of non-Hindu informants whose experiences in the family differ considerably from that of Hindu widows, but nevertheless experienced similar restrictions and discrimination in a predominantly Hindu-caste social environment of local society).

In Hindu-caste communities, the restrictive and discriminatory customary practices within the deceased husband's joint family and local society lead to a complete collapse of the widow's social networks and support system after the death of the husband, which is accompanied by isolation, loss of self-esteem and self-confidence, and growing anxiety. Few resources of support remain for the widows after the death of their husband. Where they do exist, they are the result of exceptional circumstances like the existence of surviving relatives from their natal family living close enough to the widow in order to provide help and support. But of course, widows' life courses too are not static. Children are growing up and become a source of support, often at

the high price of interrupted education and early transition into gainful work.

The interviews with my informants reveal that widowhood in Nepal is not a static stage in life but a process which includes several stages evolves in the life course of the widows.³⁶ The first stage is characterized by grief, despair, and the collapse of the widows' social networks and support systems. In this stage, widows experience isolation and discrimination within their husbands' joint families and local society. Their social position drops to the bottom of the social hierarchy. In this phase, widows experience a loss of self-esteem and self-confidence and growing anxiety in dealing with other people. The support of relatives from a widow's natal family and from own children can mitigate the impact of this collapse of social networks and support systems, but this depends on the age of the widow, the distance of her residence from that of her natal family, the age of her children, and her children's place of living.

Judging from my interviews, daughters have become important actors. Rapid socio-economic changes have directly and indirectly influenced the structure of Nepalese households and the definition of a family in itself. We can see a shift from the traditional joint family unit to nuclear families including only the husband, wife, and children. With the expansion of international labor migration³⁷ and educational migration, in many cases sons and their families live in foreign countries and even if they send financial help, they cannot perform their traditional responsibility of day-to-day care for their old parents. Daughters are emerging as prominent economic contributors and care-takers for their widowed mothers. This is another factor in changing family practices in Nepalese Hindu-caste society.

The next stage in the widows' life course is a more or less prolonged process in which widows reestablish their own new social relationships and rebuild social networks and support systems. But in general, under the conditions of Nepalese Hindu-caste society, especially young widows have almost no resources of their own left to alter their life situation by themselves. At this point, NGOs aiming at improving widows' life become important. Participation in such NGOs enables the widows to overcome the psychological impact of widowhood by rebuilding their self-confidence and reducing their anxiety in social interaction with other people. It also provides them with new social relationships that allow them to rebuild their social networks and support systems. Crucial in this process is the development of communication with other widows and the sharing of their experiences, which has a cathartic effect on the widows in understanding that they are not alone in their plight. The NGOs, on the other hand, help them all of the way in this process by providing a variety of material and non-material supports that enable them to deal with and function in their social environment and build an independent life.

Notes

1. I borrowed the notion of 'local society' from the term 「地域社会」 in Japanese rural and urban sociology, which more or less corresponds to the term 'community' in American rural and urban sociology but without necessarily implying the closely-knit bonds and social relations associated with 'community' in contrast to 'society' in most Western social sciences.
2. 「ネパール社会における寡婦について — 農村地域チトワン郡4地域の実態調査報告」、『ジェンダー研究』第22号、2020.2、119～143頁。
3. This was essentially a quantitative survey, but due to problems with gaining sufficient information for sampling, addresses provided by the Social Security Administration were relied upon, which had a bias towards recipients of aid from this agency. Further problems were changes of address and refusal of participation in the survey. In the end, it was impossible to draw a representative random sample, and Lopata had to rely on weighted nonprobability methods of sampling (Lopata 1979: 56-60). The problems which Lopata encountered in a society with abundant demographical information and a highly developed research infrastructure suggest that it would be impossible to draw a representative random sample of widows in Nepal, where the infrastructure for research and demographic information is in its infancy.
4. "Service" can basically be defined as all kinds of help, like household repairs, shopping, care in the case of sickness, child care, etc.; activities of help in the personal life of the widows that are rendered for free and do not include participation in economic activities.
5. Set one includes resources that are normally defined as *cultural resources* like education and skills, but beside cultural elements it should also include psychological elements like resilience, independence, self-esteem, and self-confidence. Set two clearly belongs to *economic resources* and set three to *social resources*. Lopata names these resources as *resources of the self*, and I will use the same term. For the second set I use the term *economic resources*, and for the third set the term *social resources*.
6. Concerning family and relatives, they should further be distinguished into family and relatives of the deceased husband, family and relatives from the widow's birth family, and from the widow's own family of procreation, like children and grandchildren.
7. *Old* and *new* friends and acquaintances distinguish those that existed before the death of the husband and those that the widow acquired after his death. Local society is actually the social environment in which widows are submerged. It defines the customary restrictions on widows' life and is also affected by social changes concerning these customs. Lopata calls this *community*.
8. The distance between the homes of the widow and that of her relatives was also important because it decides the frequency of possible contacts with each other.
9. The population census of Nepal is executed every ten years, and the next census is planned for 2021. According to the United Nations Department of Economics and Social Affairs, Population Division, the current population is estimated at 29,136,808 people (www.worldometer.info, September 25, 2020). According to the National Planning Commission of Nepal, life expectancy at birth in 2020 is estimated at 73.2 years for women and 70.1 years for men (www.worldometer.info, September 25, 2020).
10. The position of Nepal has slightly improved in the Global Gender Gap Report 2020.
11. The major reason is the belief that contact with blood causes impurity, which is a religious belief that is not limited to the Hindu religion, but can also be found in Buddhism, Shinto, and the Abrahamic religions. The association with blood and women is based on the involvement of blood in menstruation and child-birth.
12. On the other hand, as historical examples show from migrants to the big cities in European societies of the second half of the 19th century, immigrants to the United States in the 19th century, European countries during the big depression of the late 1920s and early 1930s and after World War II show that the temporary formation of joint families in order to share scarce resources is a common strategy in many societies in times of crisis and disaster. The necessity of a balance between the economic resources of a household and the number of members it can support is also well known from social and economic historical research on peasant families in Europe and Japan.
13. Until 2018 Nepal had only two sets of law, the Constitution of Nepal from September 2015 and the National Code of Nepal (*Muluki Ain*), which was a single comprehensive law including criminal law, civil law, and

- administrative law. In August 2018, the National Code was replaced by three separate sets of Criminal Code, Civil Code, and Administrative Law. Women's right to inheritance were first recognized in 1997, but these rights were severely limited. The 11th amendment of the code in 2002 abolished major limitations and strengthened the rights of women, which were further reinforced in 2006.
14. This is possible because of the lack of a system of comprehensive family registration like in Japan, so the proof of identity and marriage is controlled by the male members of the joint family.
 15. Cf. the low position of prostitutes (*badi*) among the 'untouchable' persons in Nepalese caste hierarchy (Brunson 2016: Appendix A, loc. 3551).
 16. The term *patrifocal* was coined by Bennett (1983) to describe an ideology which is focused on male precedence in all matters of life.
 17. In Bennett's book and also in Brunson's book, the Nepalese term *sasu* is used by daughters-in-law for a mother-in-law when addressing and referring to her, as both authors observed during their fieldwork and noted it as a form of deference. But in Nepalese language, the term can also be used in a more neutral way.
 18. Polygamy has been customarily practiced in Nepalese Hindu-caste society.
 19. Another term coined by Bennett (1983) from the Latin word *filia*=daughter + *focal* in order to analyze the differences in the treatment of daughters and daughters-in-law.
 20. "In principal higher position" is, of course, a question of generation. Unmarried aunts and sisters of their husband's generation have a higher position, but not their own daughters.
 21. Marriage of girls under the age of ten is especially practiced among several tribes of Nepalese, which are concentrated in Northern India, but also exist in Nepal. The problem is not only the child bride but also of those who become widows while still younger than ten years. These child widows, called *vaikalya*, are not allowed to remarry and are forced to stay widows for the rest of their life. Recent research by WHR estimates their number in Nepal to be about 900-1000 women, but WHR also notes that there might exist a considerably greater number of cases.
 22. The World Economic Forum's *Global Gender Gap Report 2018* reports male literacy rate in Nepal as 71.7% and female literacy rate as 48.8%. In 2018, there was almost no difference between boys and girls concerning school attendance, but most of the elder women who became informants in anthropological fieldwork only attended primary school, many of them not completing their school years, and once school is finished, literacy is lost if you have no opportunity to read and write.
 23. 2011 was the first time that the National Census of Nepal explored the marital status of men and women.
 24. A detailed description of the treatment of widows proscribed by the *Code of Manu* (*Manusmriti*) can be found in Ramabai (1888: 69-93). Ramabai already severely criticized the authenticity of the *Manusmriti* as a religious text, and the criticism of the authenticity of the text, especially of the *vulgata* Kolkata version of the text that was translated into English and widely promulgated as the authoritative traditional Hindu law by the British colonial authorities throughout South Asia in the late 19th century, has become more pronounced in recent research by Sanskrit scholars, cf. *Manusmriti* in Wikipedia English version (2020.10.04).
 25. For reasons of the negative implications of the Nepalese term *bidhwa* for widow, WHR chose 'single women' (*ekal mahila*) as a euphemistic term for 'widows'.
 26. The Ministry of Health's *Nepal Demographic and Health Survey 2016* reports that among women aged 15-49, 74% of the divorced/separated/widowed women were gainfully employed compared to 58.9% of married women and 47.6 of never-married women (Ministry of Health 2017: Table 3.8.1).
 27. Especially by American cultural anthropologists affiliated with South Asian Area Studies.
 28. Widows in India have gained the attention of European visitors since the sixteenth century because of the high-caste practice of *sati*, the immolation of the widow on the funeral pyre of her deceased husband. During the 19th century, the British colonial powers conducted a survey concerning the extent of this practice with the astonishing result that it was extremely rare and limited to the highest castes. Nevertheless, since the 19th century, research on the treatment of widows in Indian Hindu caste society was popular among colonial bureaucrats and Christian missionaries, because it allowed the casting of doubt on the level of civilization of Hindu religion and society.
 29. I had planned to select informants who had been included in the group discussions in 2016, but

- unfortunately in 2018 Mangalpur could not be included in the field work and I had to choose informants from a different village.
30. The terms “young”, “middle-aged” and “old-aged” do not refer to the actual age of the informants at the time of my interviews, but to their age at the time of the death of their husbands. The husbands of young widows died when the women were aged 18-35 years, middle-aged widows were 36-59 years, and old-aged widows were 60 or more years old.
 31. From the complete interview I know that this widow owns considerable property, and it seems that her sons only share their duty to care for her in the hope of inheritance. But because of the bad treatment she has received from her sons and their families, she has decided to leave her property to her daughter who lives in very poor conditions, which will be very difficult due to the opposition of the sons.
 32. In 1995, the government of Nepal started pilot projects for universal old-age allowances that are not based on an insurance system but payed out of the general government budget. In 1996-1997, two additional social security programs, the Helpless Widows Allowances for widows of 60 years of age and above and the pension for disabled persons based on taxes, were introduced. These systems have become universal since then, but the amount of the allowances is not sufficient to independently guarantee the livelihood of the recipients. And especially in the case of widows, social impediments to apply for eligibility also exist.
 33. One widow actually had post-secondary education at the time of my interviews, which was acquired through adult education after the death of her husband. Actually, adult education played an important role in the life of the widows, especially for acquiring literacy, because their education had been interrupted after marriage. It is not always clear, when this adult education occurred. Adult education classes were provided by the Nepalese government as well as by NGOs trying to increase the literacy rate.
 34. The numbers show a much higher proportion of widows who received formal education and of literate widows in my sample than the Census of Nepal of 2011, cf. Women for Human Rights (2011: 10).
 35. These pensions and allowances amounted to 2000 Rs per month at the time of my interviews. This amount is insufficient to support a person, but it is an important additional income. However, there had been problems for several of my informants, including a widow whose husband died in a work accident in Saudi Arabia, due to negative interference of their husbands' joint family before they were able to prove their claims.
 36. Lopata's research on widows in Chicago was based on a quantitative cross-sectional survey, which only gives very limited information concerning changes in the widows' lives during the life course; however, she was aware of such changes.
 37. Between 2008 and 2017, the Nepalese government issued 3.5 million labor permits to migrant workers in foreign countries (<https://asiafoundation.org>, 2020.11.09), but these numbers are by no means complete because they only include migrant workers that participate in bilateral programs between the state of Nepal and foreign countries and does not include migrants for other purposes, like education or family dependents who later entered gainful employment in their host countries. The economic impact of labor migration is immense. In 2017, the total remittances from labor migrants to relatives in Nepal amounted to USD 6.56 Billion.

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Widowhood in Contemporary Nepal and Widows' Support Systems

Kabita THAPA

Abstract

The Nepalese NGO *Women for Human Rights – Single Women's Group*, which supported me during my field work, is the biggest actor working for the improvement of the life of widows in Nepal, but it does not have the same access to material resources as the international NGOs from highly developed countries. Therefore, the material support of WHR is concentrated on fostering self-help and economic independence on the micro level through the establishment of savings and credit unions and skill training. But this approach also fosters the development of widows' social networks and self-confidence. Several of my informants have grown from discriminated beings on the bottom of the social hierarchy to leaders within their community.

謝辞：数々のご助言を頂いた中部大学大学院国際人間学研究科の Ulrich Moehwald 教授、並びに査読者の方々に深謝いたします。