

Socio-Economic Status and Living Condition of Widows In Rural Bangladesh

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Abstract:

This paper aims to understand the socio-economic status and living conditions of rural widows in Parila Union, Paba Upazila, Rajshahi District, Bangladesh focusing on their socio-cultural deprivation, social security, and community participation. The research covered 16 villages and included social surveys that captured the experiences of 201 widows. Drawing on both qualitative and quantitative data, the study reveals the multifaceted challenges widows face, including social isolation, financial instability, and vulnerability to harassment and criticism. The transition from wifhood to widowhood marks a significant shift in a woman's status within the community, often leading to reduced social participation and economic hardship. The findings indicate that while a majority of widows maintain some degree of community involvement, their participation in social and cultural events diminishes post-widowhood due to stigmatization and financial constraints. The study examines the economic, social, and emotional support systems available to these widows, revealing a lack of comprehensive formal support in Bangladesh, with most assistance coming from family and community members. Many widows lack regular financial support, and the government's widow allowance is insufficient. The study shows that aged widows, while able to coexist within families, are often excluded from decision-making processes and are deprived of respect and medical facilities, increasing their vulnerability. These socio-economic challenges, including economic deprivation, social subjugation, and humiliation, underscore the critical needs of widows and highlight the necessity for improved support systems to enhance their quality of life. Social and cultural participation diminishes post-widowhood due to stigmatization and financial constraints, while security concerns restrict their mobility, especially at night. Additionally, the study highlights the adverse impact on children of widows, who often suffer from bullying and lack of support. Despite these challenges, some widows exhibit resilience, leveraging community ties for support. The study underscores the urgent need for comprehensive support systems to improve the quality of life for widows in rural Bangladesh, addressing both their economic needs and social reintegration.

Key Terms: Rural widow, Social security, Social isolation, Social participation, Economic hardship, Resilience, Social subjugation, Social reintegration.

Introduction:

Widowhood in rural Bangladesh represents a complex intersection of social, cultural, and economic challenges, profoundly impacting the

lives of women following the loss of their husbands. This demographic is particularly vulnerable, facing discrimination, economic

instability, and social isolation due to entrenched cultural norms and structural inequalities. In traditional Bangladeshi society, a widow's identity and status are closely tied to that of her deceased husband, leading to a marginalization often described as a "social death" (Chen, 1998). The transition from wifehood to widowhood marks a significant shift, where women find themselves excluded from social rituals and economic opportunities they once shared with their spouses (Shamim, 1995). This loss of status not only affects their social standing but also limits their economic agency, as widows are frequently deprived of inheritance and property rights (Salahuddin, 1995). Economically, widows in rural areas face substantial challenges. Many lack access to stable income sources, relying on precarious livelihoods such as agricultural labor or informal work (BBS, 2020). Financial independence is further compromised by limited educational opportunities and restricted access to credit and financial services (Salahuddin, 1995). This economic vulnerability is exacerbated by societal perceptions that widows are "unlucky" or inauspicious, which hinders their participation in community activities and economic networks (Viswanathan, 2019).

Moreover, the socio-economic impact of widowhood extends beyond the individual to affect their children and dependents. Studies indicate that children of widows often face social stigma, reduced educational opportunities, and economic hardships due to the absence of a paternal figure (Shafiq, 2024). These intergenerational effects underscore the broader implications of widowhood on familial and community dynamics in rural Bangladesh. By shedding light on the lived experiences of widows and their socio-economic conditions, this study seeks to inform targeted interventions and policies aimed at improving the welfare and empowerment of widows in Bangladesh's rural communities.

Statement of the Problem

In rural Bangladesh, particularly in Parila Union, widows face significant socio-economic challenges that profoundly impact their quality of life. Widows in these areas experience socio-cultural

deprivation, financial instability, social isolation, and are often excluded from community participation and decision-making processes. Despite some support from state provisions, such as widow allowances and free rice, these measures are insufficient to meet their needs. The transition from wifehood to widowhood typically marks a substantial decline in a woman's social status, exacerbating economic hardship and stigmatization. Additionally, the security concerns and reduced mobility of widows further contribute to their marginalization. The situation is even direr for elderly widows who, despite living with family, are deprived of respect and medical care. Widows' children also suffer from bullying and lack of support, which adds another layer of complexity to their already difficult circumstances. The lack of comprehensive formal support systems in Bangladesh means that most widows rely heavily on family and community members for emotional and financial support. However, this informal support network is often inadequate, leaving many widows vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion. The multifaceted challenges faced by widows in rural Bangladesh necessitate urgent attention and intervention. There is a critical need for comprehensive support systems that not only address the economic needs of widows but also facilitate their social reintegration and improve their overall quality of life. Without targeted interventions, widows in rural Bangladesh will continue to endure significant hardships and remain marginalized within their communities. Against this backdrop the present study aims to examine the socio-economic status of widows and to assess their living conditions within the study area.

Review of literature:

The socio-economic condition of rural widows in Bangladesh is characterized by significant challenges, including economic deprivation, social isolation, and pervasive marginalization. Widowhood, a significant life transition marked by the loss of a spouse, has profound emotional, social, economic, and health implications. Bennet (2012) asserts that widowhood affects almost every

domain of life, impacting psychological, social, physical, practical, and economic well being. Numerous studies emphasize the transformative nature of widowhood, noting its substantial effect on physical and mental well-being (Bonanno & Kaltman, 2001; Zisook, Shuchter, & Sledge, 1994). Widows, particularly in rural areas, often live at or below the poverty threshold and require social program assistance (Munnell, 2004; Weaver, 2010). Younger widows, who may not have completed their financial preparations for retirement, are especially vulnerable to financial stress (Smith & Zick, 1986; Sevak et al., 2003). They may face significant reductions in income and benefits, compelling them to adjust their labor force participation and manage new challenges related to childcare and transportation (Amato & Partridge, 1987; Grass-Sternas, 1994; Thoits, 2010). Research by Rostami, Ghazinour, and Nygren (2012) highlights that rural widows face exacerbated challenges due to the absence of robust support systems, economic opportunities, and healthcare infrastructure. Marty Chen and Jean Dreze (1995) argue that the difficulties faced by widows are intertwined with those of other single women, driven by patriarchal institutions such as patrilineal inheritance and the gender division of labor. These widows endure specific hardships related to lifestyle restrictions and negative social attitudes, necessitating focused social science research and organized social action. Anjali Chandra (2011) underscores the vulnerability of widows in India, advocating for urgent policy interventions to include widows positively in societal frameworks. Yoshihiko Kadoya and Ting Yin (2011) provide a nuanced view, revealing that widow discrimination in India varies by region, although traditional widow discrimination persists in some areas. Anji and Velumani (2013) find that rural widows in Dindigul District face more severe socio-economic hardships than their urban counterparts, indicating that widowhood exacerbates social customs. Sharma and Boro (2017) explore the global disparity in the treatment of widows compared to widowers, emphasizing the need for more equitable treatment. Radhika Kapur (2018) delves into the socio-cultural and

psychological conditions of widows in Indian society, discussing their problems and advocating for measures to improve their status. In rural societies, aged widows face particularly severe discrimination and marginalization. Factors such as early marriage, polygamy, wide age gaps between spouses, and the longer life expectancy of women result in a higher number of aged widows compared to widowers (Census 1974, 1981). These widows often find themselves unacceptable to employers due to their age, leading to economic hardship and social isolation. Research indicates that Hindu widows face more severe social, economic, and legal discrimination compared to their Muslim counterparts, including religious barriers to inheritance and mandatory lifestyle changes after their husband's death. Living arrangements become increasingly important as people age, with aged widows relying on family members for financial support and informal care (Hotz, McGarry, & Wiemers, 2010). Declining health and increasing disability necessitate co-residency with family members (Himes & Ying, 2007). The literature on widowhood in South Africa, as discussed by Tshaka, Tanga, and Ntshongwana (2023) highlights similar socio-economic challenges faced by widows, underscoring the universality of these issues across different cultural contexts. In summary, the literature reveals that rural widows in Bangladesh endure significant socio-economic hardships, driven by patriarchal structures and compounded by age, religion, and social customs. Comprehensive support systems and targeted policy interventions are urgently needed to improve their living conditions and socio-economic status, ensuring their inclusion and empowerment within society.

Method:

This study was conducted in Parila Union, Paba Upazila, Rajshahi District, Bangladesh, with a focus on the socio-cultural deprivation, social security, and community participation of widows. It covered 16 villages and conducted a social survey. There were 217 widows in the study area. Although the researcher attempted to include all of

them in the survey, 16 declined to participate. Interview using a schedule was applied to collect the data. The schedule included both open and closed ended questions. Additionally, both participant and non-participant observations were used to gather contextual information about the respondents' living conditions and interactions within the community. The data were analyzed using statistical methods to identify the key factors influencing livelihoods of the widows. Ethical considerations were carefully addressed, including obtaining informed consent from participants and ensuring the confidentiality of their information.

Result and Discussion:

This section provides an overview of the study population concerning various socio-economic characteristics of the widows in the study area, showcasing their age distribution, education levels, family structures, and current occupations. The widows surveyed ranged in age from under 30 to over 80 years. A quarter of the widows (25.37%) were aged between 41 and 50 years, and 22.88% were aged between 61 and 70 years. Notably, 124 widows (61.68%) were under 60 years old, indicating they were still within the biologically active age range and could be considered potential

human resources for productive work. Conversely, 32.9% of the widows were elderly and required security and welfare support.

Demographic information on the widows:

The widows reported that during their husbands' lifetimes, they did not have to worry about their livelihoods, as their husbands provided for them. In the 'Other' category, which accounted for 11.94% of the husbands, there was a range of occupations. Some were seasonal workers or involved in seasonal businesses, while others, due to age, no longer engaged in regular employment. Before their husbands passed away, the widows relied on their husbands' earnings and did not work outside the home. Their primary responsibilities were caring for the family and their children. However, after their husbands' death, they were compelled to seek employment outside the home. Currently, only the housewives aged 60 or above remained at home, as many had returned to being housewives due to the challenges brought about by age. The widows in the study were categorized into several groups based on their current occupations: housewives, those engaged in farming, handicrafts, business, maid service, poultry farming and other occupations.

Table1. Demographic information on the widows

Personal information		Number of respondents	Percentage
Age	<30	8	3.98
	31-40	22	10.94
	41-50	51	25.37
	51-60	43	21.39
	61-70	46	22.88
	71-80	16	7.96
	81+	5	2.48
	Total	201	100
Education	Not able to sign	107	53.23
	Able to sign	47	23.38
	Primary	32	15.92
	Below SSC	10	4.98
	HSC	5	2.49

	Total	201	100
Widows Occupation	Home making	84	41.79
	Maid servant	31	15.42
	Farming	29	14.43
	Handicrafts	13	6.47
	BusineSSss	16	7.96
	Poultry	45	22.39
	Others	11	5.47

(Multiple responses accepted regarding widow’s occupation)

Husband’s Profession	Agriculture	98	48.76
	Government Employee	9	4.48
	Day Labor	27	13.43
	Business	28	13.93
	Rickshaw Puller	7	3.48
	Auto Driver	8	3.98
	Others	24	11.94
	Total	201	100

Poultry farming is particularly significant in Parila Union, supplying a considerable quantity of chicken to the Rajshahi city market and providing employment for many low-income individuals. In the study, 45 widows (22.39%) were employed in poultry farms. Additionally, 22 widows worked as day laborers in crop fields, primarily engaged in activities such as harvesting vegetables and chilies. During different seasons, there is a need for crop processing, which requires substantial labor. In this context, 29 widows were involved in crop processing on a daily contract basis during specific seasons. Furthermore, 16 widows pursued small businesses independently. Some leased ponds to cultivate fish, others sold clothing purchased from the city market, and some traded livestock such as chickens, pigeons, quail birds, cows, and goats, and also sold eggs and cow's milk. Ten widows were engaged in various handicrafts such as making embroidered quilts, sewing, and crafting hand fans, creating these products according to the demands of the local community. Additionally, 11 widows held diverse positions as Union Councilors, worked as traditional healers, and engaged in other forms of employment.

Family Structure and Living Arrangements of the Widows

The family structure and living arrangements of widows in the study area highlights the significant factors that influence their socio-economic conditions. A significant majority of the widows (57.21%) resided in nuclear families, while 42.79% were a part of joint families. This shift away from joint family structures can be attributed to factors such as increasing urbanization, industrialization, the influence of the education system, western values, and changes in the marriage system. These societal shifts have transformed traditional family roles and living arrangements, often leaving widows in precarious situations. Social norms and values that restrict residence, remarriage, mobility, employment, and land ownership put widows in a situation of continuous dependency on their immediate kin. Widows are often marginalized and lack autonomy, relying heavily on their families for support. When a widow is the head of the household, her situation can be even worse, both economically and socially, as she is left alone with her dependent children. This scenario is particularly challenging in rural settings where

economic opportunities are limited and social safety nets are weak (Shamim and Salahuddin, 1995). In the study area, 27.36% of the widowed women with minor, teenage, or unmarried children lived in separate households, often facing financial

hardships. This indicates that a significant number of widows were struggling to manage their households independently, lacking adequate financial and social support.

Table 2: Family Structure and Living Arrangements of Widows in Rural Bangladesh

Type of family	Frequency	%		
Nuclear family	115	57.21		
Joint family	86	42.79		
Total	201	100		
Living arrangement of the widows at present			Prefer to stay with	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Self	55	27.36	38	18.91
Son	123	61.19	136	67.66
Daughter	14	6.96	23	11.44
Sister	1	0.50	0	0
Brother	1	0.50	1	0.50
Mother-father	2	1.00	3	1.49
Others.	5	2.49	0	0
Total	201	100	201	100

The majority of the widows (61.19%) lived with their sons, indicating a prevalent pattern of cohabitation. Notably, 67.66% of those living with their sons prefer this arrangement despite financial incompatibility, accommodation constraints, or disapproval from daughters-in-law. This preference for living with sons highlights the cultural expectation for sons to take care of their aging parents. In traditional Bangladeshi society, sons are often seen as the primary caregivers for their elderly parents, and widows may feel a stronger sense of security and support living with their sons, even if the situation is not ideal. In cases where sons are unwilling or unable to provide support, some widows receive assistance from their daughters, showcasing a shift in familial dynamics. A small percentage (6.96%) of widows live with their daughters, often due to the absence of sons. Interestingly, 11.44% of widows express a

preference for living with their daughters, highlighting a distinct choice in their living arrangements. This shift indicates changing attitudes toward family roles and the increasing acceptance of daughters as caregivers. It reflects a broader societal change where daughters are now more recognized and accepted as capable and willing to provide care for their aging parents. This trend is significant as it challenges the traditional gender roles and promotes a more inclusive approach to familial responsibilities.

Economic condition of the widows:

Income is a crucial factor in determining social inequality within society (Islam, 2014). Sources of income for families include businesses, crop sales, livestock, rental income, and wages or salaries earned by family members (Padmanabhan, 2006).

Table 3. Economic condition of the widows

	Economic condition	Frequency	%
Monthly Family Income	<1000	00	00
	1001-5000	21	10.45
	5001-10000	58	28.85
	10001-15000	49	24.38
	15001-20000	23	11.44
	20001>	25	12.44
	Cannot say	25	12.44
	Total	201	100
Widows Monthly Income	<1000	51	25.37
	1001-5000	42	20.90
	5001-10000	23	11.44
	10001-15000	01	0.50
	No Earning	84	41.79
	Total	201	100
Economic Status	Dependent	166	82.59
	Independent	37	18.41
	Total	201	100
Widow allowance	Frequency	%	
Yes	100	49.75	
No	101	50.25	
Total	201	100	

In rural areas, people often keep their income information private due to fears of potential risks or dangers associated with disclosing financial details. As a result, the accuracy of financial information provided may be compromised. Nevertheless, Table 2 presents the monthly income distribution among the surveyed families. It shows that approximately 10.45% of the families had a monthly income between 1,001 and 5,000 Taka. Around 28.85% of the families earned between 5,001 and 10,000 Taka per month. There were 49 families with a monthly income between 10,001 and 15,000 Taka, and 23 families earned between 15,001 and 20,000 Taka per month. Additionally, 49 respondents, typically older individuals reliant entirely on their families for financial support, did not provide information about their monthly family income. A family's monthly income is a crucial measure of its socio-economic status. The type of occupation significantly influences income levels, with lower-level occupations generally yielding

less income (Nayar, 2006). Among the surveyed widows, a substantial proportion (84 out of 201) lacked personal income entirely, relying solely on external support such as widow allowances or family assistance. Specifically, 51 widows reported monthly earnings below Tk. 1000, highlighting their reliance on these allowances. This group faced significant financial hardships. In contrast, around 20.90% of the widows earned between Tk. 1001 and 5000 per month through activities such as household work, cattle rearing, and embroidery, crucial for their economic stability. Another 11.44% enjoyed a more comfortable financial situation, earning between Tk. 5000 and 10000 monthly from occupations like farming and small businesses. These earnings underscore the diverse economic realities among widows, with a majority (82.59%) dependent on external support, while 18.41% exhibited economic independence through their own income-generating activities. Understanding these dynamics is vital for

designing targeted interventions to improve economic resilience and well-being among the widows facing financial challenges.

Property ownership and economic stability among the widows:

Property is a fundamental economic institution rooted deeply in social customs and traditions. It plays a critical role in determining the financial well-being of individuals and families. Robert H. Lowie (1927) emphasized the importance of property as a societal institution, stating, "Property is an institution by virtue of its basic character in society." This assertion underscores the idea that property ownership is not merely a personal asset but a social matter that influences an individual's status and security within the community. The data from the study area of Parilla Union reveals that 162 of the surveyed widows possessed some form of property, which significantly impacted their socio-economic status. Of these widows, many had

multiple assets. Specifically, 109 widows had a dwelling house, which they either inherited from their parents or received from their husbands. However, the ownership of these houses can be complicated. Some widows reside in their husband's house but could not claim ownership because the land on which the house stands belonged to their father-in-law. This lack of formal ownership rights left these widows vulnerable, as they had no legal claim to the property and could be displaced at the discretion of their in-laws. In addition to housing, 33.51% of the widows had some cultivable land, which provided a crucial source of income and food security. Land ownership is a significant asset in rural areas, as it allowed widows to engage in agricultural activities, which could be a primary means of livelihood. However, the amount of land owned by these widows is often minimal, limiting their ability to generate substantial income.

Table 4: Property ownership and economic stability among the widows

Property	Frequency	%
Yes	162	80.60
No	39	19.40
Total	201	100
Types of property	Frequency	%
House	109	58.92
Land	62	33.51
Ornaments	8	4.32
Others	6	3.24
Total	185	100

[Multiple Responses]

Furthermore, only a small fraction of widows (4.32%) owned gold ornaments or jewelry, which traditionally served as a form of financial security that could be sold or pawned in times of need. On the other hand, 39 widows in the study area had no property at all. This lack of assets placed them in a precarious position, forcing them to rely on the generosity and support of their offspring, parents, brothers, or in-laws. Without property or personal

assets, these widows became economically dependent on others, leading to financial hardship and a diminished quality of life. They struggled to meet their basic needs and faced social stigma due to their dependency. The issue of property ownership among widows is deeply intertwined with broader social and cultural practices. In many societies, property inheritance laws and customs favor male heirs, leaving women, particularly

widows, at a disadvantage. This systemic inequity exacerbates the economic vulnerabilities of the widows, making it difficult for them to achieve financial independence and stability. According to a study by Shamim and Salahuddin (1995), social norms and values that restrict property ownership, remarriage, mobility, and employment opportunities for widows create a cycle of dependency and poverty. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach. Legal reforms that ensure equitable property rights for women are essential. Additionally, social support programs that provide financial assistance, vocational training, and mental health services can help widows achieve economic self-sufficiency and improve their overall well-being. Community-based initiatives that raise awareness about the importance of gender equality in property ownership and inheritance can also play a crucial role in changing societal attitudes and practices.

Dress Patterns and Social Norms for Widows in Rural Bangladesh:

In many societies, widows are expected to follow certain dress codes and social behaviors that reflect their status. This practice is deeply rooted in cultural and religious traditions. For instance, after the death of their husbands, widows are often compelled to wear white saris, symbolizing purity and mourning (Padmanabhan, 2006). However, the

present study on widows in the Parilla Union reveals a shift away from these traditional norms. The data indicates that a significant majority of widows (78.11%) in the study area wore colorful clothing, while only 21.89% wore light-colored saris. Among the latter group, the choice of lighter colors is influenced by age or the preferences of relatives who gift them these saris, rather than by strict adherence to traditional dress codes for widows. None of the widows in the study area strictly followed the tradition of wearing white saris, which shows a shift away from the usual mourning attire. Festivals and cultural events play an important role in the lives of rural women in Bangladesh. Celebrations such as Pahela Boishakh (the Bengali New Year Festival) and the Spring Festival are vibrant events where women typically wear colorful clothes and adorn themselves with flowers. Younger widowed women in the study area expressed a desire to participate in these festivities wearing colorful saris.

However, societal pressure and fear of being criticized or judged for their appearance often discourage them from doing so. This highlights the tension between personal desires and societal expectations that widows face. Dress serves both functional and cultural purposes. It provides protection from the elements and signifies one's social status and identity.

Table 5: Dress Patterns and Social Norms for Widows in Rural Bangladesh

Do you wear colorful dress?	Frequency	%
Yes	157	78.11
No	44	21.89
Total	201	100
Judged by surrounding	Frequency	%
Use cosmetics and jewelry	32	15.92
Burst into laughter	39	19.40
Gorgeous dress-up	36	17.91
Do not Judged by surrounding	95	47.26
Others	2	0.99

[Multiple respondents]

As Padmanabhan (2006) notes, dress patterns vary widely across communities and cultures, and significant changes often occur in a woman's attire after her husband's death. Widows are traditionally expected to wear simple, unadorned clothing to reflect their bereavement (Kitchlu, 1993). In Bangladesh, both Muslim and Hindu widows have traditionally worn white saris as a symbol of purity and mourning. This contrasts with the bright red saris worn by brides, which represent vitality and life. In addition to changes in dress, widows also experience restrictions on personal adornments and social behaviors. Symbols of marriage, such as the red mark on the forehead, sindur (vermillion) in the hair parting, shakka (bangles) among Hindus, and nose pins and bangles among Muslims, are typically prohibited for widows (Shamim and Salahuddin, 1995). These cultural norms dictate that widows give up all forms of adornment associated with marriage. The study revealed that widows in the Parilla Union also faced similar restrictions. Many reported that they wore nose pins and bangles during their marriages, which were forcibly removed after their husbands' deaths. Although widows are later allowed to wear certain types of jewelry such as bangles, earrings, and necklaces, the nose pin remains prohibited. This practice underscores the cultural belief that a widow should not appear adorned or attractive, as

it is considered inappropriate for her to seek attention after her husband's death. However, the study also noted a gradual shift in these cultural norms. While there was historically a restriction on the use of cosmetics by widows, most widows in the study area did not face significant obstacles in using cosmetics like talcum powder, lipstick, nail polish, bindi, and kumkum at the time of the interview. Nonetheless, 32 widows reported facing barriers and social taunts when using cosmetics, with neighbors questioning whom they were trying to impress in absence of a husband. Additionally, 39 widows experienced criticism for laughing or talking loudly with relatives and neighbors, warning them to behave more somberly.

Challenges Faced by Children of Widows:

In the patriarchal society of Bangladesh, the father typically serves as the primary guardian, responsible for the family's welfare and security. The death of the father, therefore, leaves the family in a vulnerable state, comparable to a boat without sails, adrift and directionless. This metaphor aptly captures the sense of disorientation and susceptibility that families, especially children, experience in the absence of a male guardian. The absence of this figure leads to a host of challenges that extend beyond financial difficulties, including social and security-related issues.

Table 6: Challenges Faced by the Children of Widows

Because of widowhood do your children face Challenges?	Frequency	%
Yes	75	38.27
No (No daughter. The children have grown up)	121	61.73
Total	196	100

(Five widows have no children)

Type of Challenges	Frequency	%
Criticism	19	9.69
Bullying	20	10.20
Being hurt by anybody	7	0.57
Eve teasing	4	2.04
Not receiving help from others	27	1.78
Others (Economic problem)	9	4.59

(Multiple respondents)

The study conducted in the Parilla Union highlights the various problems encountered by the children of widows. Out of the 196 widows surveyed, 38.27% reported that their children faced problems due to the absence of a father. In contrast, the children of 61.73% of the widows did not face significant issues, which these widows attributed to their children having grown up or not having daughters, who are often more vulnerable in such contexts. One of the significant challenges faced by these children is criticism and bullying from their peers. The study revealed that 19 children faced criticism, and 20 children were bullied because of their father's absence. These issues often arose from the stigma attached to widowhood and the perceived weakness of a family without a male guardian. Such social ostracism can severely affect the mental health and well-being of the children, leading to a lack of confidence and increased stress. Another critical issue is the lack of support from the community. Twenty-seven children reported not receiving help from others during crises, highlighting the social isolation that widow-headed families often experience. The absence of a father figure means that these children don't have someone strong to support them with financial, social, or educational needs. This lack of support can exacerbate the family's hardships, making it difficult for them to navigate through daily challenges. Economic challenges are also prominent. Nine children attempted to secure financial loans but were unsuccessful due to the absence of a father. Lenders were hesitant to

provide loans without a male guardian to guarantee repayment. This financial exclusion further deepens the economic vulnerability of these families, limiting their opportunities for growth and stability. Moreover, the study found that some children experienced physical harm and harassment. Seven children reported being hurt by their school friends, underscoring the lack of protection and adversities they faced without a father. Additionally, daughters of four widows encountered eve-teasing, a form of sexual harassment. This not only threatens their safety but also their dignity and mental health. In response, some widows took the matter into their own hands, addressing the families of the perpetrators. However, in some instances, four families chose to marry off their daughters without resolving the issue, reflecting the societal pressures and the drastic measures taken to ensure their daughters' safety.

Social participation and familial relationships of the widows:

Bangladesh is renowned for its vibrant culture, with numerous national, religious, social, and cultural festivals celebrated throughout the year. These events play a significant role in rural communities, serving as opportunities for socialization and cultural expression. However, the participation of widows in these community occasions drastically changes after the death of their husbands.

Table 7: Social participation and familial relationships of the widows

Before widowhood			After widowhood	
Do your neighbors invite you on special occasions?	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Yes	197	98.01	181	90.05
No	4	1.99	20	9.95
Total	201	100	201	100
Before widowhood			After widowhood	
Do you visit relatives?	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Yes	192	95.52	172	85.57
No	9	4.48	29	14.43
Total	201	100	201	100

The data from the study reveals that before widowhood, 98.01% of women were invited to community occasions by their neighbors. This figure drops to 90.05% after widowhood. This decline highlights the social exclusion widow's face in rural Bangladesh. Widows often attribute their reduced social invitations to the death of their husbands, which signifies their social death as well. Dr. Joyce Akumaa (2016) emphasizes that in many cultures, including Bangladesh, a widow's identity and rights are significantly diminished after her husband's death. Widows are often blamed for their husbands' deaths and are expected to repent for perceived faults, leading to their exclusion from social functions. This perception takes away their social standing, reducing their participation in community activities.

In traditional Bangladeshi society, a woman's social status is closely tied to her husband's standing in the community. Shamim (1995) elaborates that a wife's involvement in community affairs is often dependent on her husband's respectability in the locality. After a husband's death, the widow loses whatever social position she enjoyed, leading to her exclusion from community events. This is not surprising given that, in most cases, widows' involvement in community affairs declines significantly after their husbands' death. Financial instability further exacerbates the social exclusion of widows. Participation in community events often requires presenting gifts, which many widows cannot afford. This inability to contribute financially to social events marginalizes them further. Additionally, old age is a factor that limits widows' social participation. Many widows in the study cited their advanced age and physical inability to attend social events as reasons for not being invited. This physical limitation adds to their social isolation, making it difficult for them to engage in community activities. When it comes to visiting relatives, the trend is similar. Before widowhood, 95.52% of the respondents visited their relatives' houses. This figure drops to 85.57% after widowhood. The decline in visiting relatives is primarily due to financial constraints. Visiting relatives requires money for transportation and

gifts, which many widows cannot afford. Additionally, widows often feel less welcome and supported by their relatives, who may view them as a burden. This perception further isolates widows, limiting their social interactions and support networks.

Moreover, the reasons for visiting relatives change after widowhood. Before becoming widows, women visited their relatives for socialization and family gatherings. However, after becoming widows, they often visit relatives seeking financial assistance or emotional support. Widows face extreme financial problems in the absence of their husbands and visit their relatives to seek help. Spending time with relatives provides emotional solace and helps alleviate their sense of loneliness and sorrow. However, the lack of financial resources and the perception of being a burden make these visits less frequent and more challenging.

Discussion:

The study conducted in Parilla Union provides a detailed look at the lives of widows, focusing on their economic and cultural conditions. It reveals that many widows face significant financial challenges, often struggling to support themselves. A large number of these women have no personal income and must rely on others for financial help, such as receiving widow allowances or family support. This finding is consistent with the observations made by Nayar (2006), who noted that people in lower-level jobs typically earn less money. Widows, due to their limited opportunities, often find themselves in these lower-income roles, making them particularly vulnerable to financial hardship. The study's finding that 82.59% of widows depend on external support highlights a widespread issue of economic dependency among widows, similar to what has been observed in other research. This means that the majority of widows in the study area are not able to earn enough to sustain themselves and must rely on help from others. However, the study also shows that there are some variations in this pattern. A small portion of widows in the area engage in activities like farming or running small businesses, which

provide them with some income. This suggests that while many widows are dependent on others, there are also examples of women who have managed to find ways to earn money and become somewhat financially stable. This adds a more complex understanding of their economic situation, showing that not all widows are entirely dependent, and some have found ways to be economically resilient despite the challenges they face. Another key finding is the importance of property ownership in determining the financial stability of widows. The study found that many widows own some form of property, which plays a crucial role in their socio-economic status. This aligns with the views of Robert H. Lowie (1927), who argued that property is a fundamental part of society, closely tied to social customs and traditions. However, the study also points out that many widows who live in their late husbands' homes do not have formal ownership rights, leaving them vulnerable to being displaced. This highlights the ongoing legal and social barriers that make it difficult for widows to secure their property rights, emphasizing the need for legal reforms to protect these women. Cultural expectations and social norms around widowhood, particularly in terms of dress and personal adornment, are also changing. The study found that most widows now wear colorful clothing, moving away from the traditional white saris that symbolize mourning. This change suggests a shift in societal attitudes, where personal choices and the influence of younger family members are becoming more important in determining how widows dress. This shift contrasts with Padmanabhan's (2006) findings, which noted that widows were often forced to wear white as a sign of purity and mourning. However, despite this shift, the study also found that widows still face criticism for using cosmetics or engaging in behaviors that others consider inappropriate for their status. This reflects the ongoing tension between traditional norms and modern influences, where some aspects of culture are slowly changing, while others remain deeply rooted in society. The study also highlights the difficulties faced by the children of widows, who often experience bullying, criticism, and a lack of support from their

communities. These challenges are similar to those identified by Shamim and Salahuddin (1995), who noted that the social and financial exclusion of widows extends to their children as well. The study found that the absence of a father figure makes these children particularly vulnerable, emphasizing the need for targeted support to address both the economic needs of widows and the social and psychological well-being of their children. The study's findings on the harassment and violence faced by these children, including physical abuse and eve-teasing, underline the urgent need for protective measures and community support to ensure the safety and dignity of these families. Finally, the study examines how social participation and relationships with family members change after widowhood. It found that widows often experience a significant decline in social invitations and visits to relatives, leading to social isolation. This finding is consistent with Dr. Joyce Akumaa's (2016) observation that widows in many cultures lose their social standing and rights after their husbands die. The study also found that financial constraints further limit widows' ability to participate in social activities, adding an economic layer to the issue of social exclusion. This echoes the research of Shamim (1995), who noted that a widow's involvement in community affairs often depends on her husband's social standing, and after his death, she loses the respect and status that enabled her to participate in social interactions.

In summary, the study of widows in Parilla Union provides a comprehensive look at the economic, social, and cultural challenges they face. It both confirms and expands upon existing research, showing how deeply interconnected issues like economic dependency, property rights, cultural norms, and social participation are in the lives of widows. The study highlights the need for holistic interventions that address these challenges, aiming to improve the well-being and resilience of widows and their families in rural Bangladesh.

Conclusion:

The study on widows in Parila Union underscores the profound and multifaceted challenges they face, spanning economic, social, and cultural

dimensions. Widows contribute significantly to the local economy, particularly through employment in poultry farming and various entrepreneurial activities, yet they often remain financially unstable and reliant on external support. The shift from traditional joint families to nuclear households exacerbates their vulnerability, particularly for those heading households alone. Property ownership emerges as a crucial determinant of economic stability, but legal and social barriers frequently leave widows without formal claims, intensifying their dependency and insecurity. Cultural norms regarding dress and personal adornment further marginalize widows, reinforcing societal expectations that limit their autonomy and personal expression. The study also highlights the compounded difficulties faced by their children, who suffer from social ostracism, financial exclusion, and lack of community support. Social participation declines significantly after widowhood, with financial constraints and old age further isolating widows from community activities and familial support networks.

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