

## Missing Widows

Siwan Anderson and Debraj Ray



Photo: Courtesy Zayira Ray

**M**arried individuals exhibit lower mortality rates than their unmarried counterparts in most parts of the world. As Zheng and Thomas (2013) observe, “the beneficial effect of marriage on health is one of the most established findings in medical sociology, demography, and social epidemiology.” After all, marriage provides significant economic and psychological benefits, and it involves two partners caring for each other. The loss of a spouse erodes many of these benefits.

In some regions of the world, the death of a spouse means brutally more. Widows face exacerbating legal, social and economic barriers. Widowhood means not only the loss of the main breadwinner, but also enforces changes of diet and dress, social isolation, and strong norms against remarriage. In South Asia, widows are supposedly harbingers of bad fortune. In Africa, they can be persecuted for witchcraft. The spouse’s family often provides little support in this patrilocal context. The hold on property is tenuous to say the least

This is a problem on a grand scale. In India alone, there are more than 46 million widows; in sub-Saharan Africa, over 22 million.

We place this phenomenon in the broader context of female-to-male sex ratios, which vary worldwide, reaching their nadir in parts of Asia. Amartya Sen in his (1990) article in the *New York Review of Books*: “More Than 100 Million Women are Missing,” translated the ratios into numbers to derive the numbers of additional living women in, say, China or India if these countries had the same gender ratios as in developed countries, where women and men (presumably) receive similar care.

The vast literature that followed these early analyses has largely emphasized skewed sex ratios at birth, a red flag for sex-selective abortion, concluding that gender-biased parental preferences overwhelmingly shape the overall female deficit in Asia. But in Anderson and Ray (2010, 2012, 2018), we argue that there is a larger panoply of forces underlying skewed gender ratios. Instead of relying on gender ratios at birth, we estimated the numbers of missing women in every age category. We conclude that the vast majority of missing women are actually of adult age in Asia. We also found a comparable number in sub-Saharan Africa.

Our methodology did not disentangle the role of direct gender discrimination from other factors—biological, social, environmental, behavioural, or economic—in explaining excess female mortality at older ages. However, it allows us to bring together and actually compare a variety of specific sources of excess female mortality. It is in this context that we return to the question of widows, or actually unmarried women more generally, given that the data on death rates by marital status is sparse in developing countries (see Anderson and Ray 2019 for a discussion).

Both developed and developing countries suffer from the mortality spike of widowhood. But for a region to have excess female mortality on this score, it must exhibit not just a mortality spike (which is necessary but not sufficient), but a relatively large spike. The price of widowhood must be steep, not in an absolute but in a comparative sense. In South Asia or sub-Saharan Africa, that additional spike might emanate for the culture and region specific reasons we mention above that place additional social, economic, and legal constraints on widows. We would like to compare the size of that extra spike to excess female mortality from all sources. What proportion of excess female mortality among adult women can actually be attributed to widowhood alone?

Our methodology, based on Anderson and Ray (2010), tells us that there are approximately 1.5 million adult women missing each year, from all causes, distributed over India (and South Asia more generally), China, Southeast and West Asia, and in the African continent. Moreover, our computations indicate that that the absence of over forty per cent of these missing women can be attributed to their

Social and economic controls on the lives of widows are bad enough; when there is no active legislation either to support their right to property, the excess mortality of widows in many parts of the world is not surprising at all.

non-married – predominantly widowhood – status. These estimates vary by region. In India and other parts of South and Southeast Asia, it is 55%, for sub-Saharan Africa, 35%, and for China it is “only” 13%.

That over 40% of excess female adult mortality can be attributed to just this one factor is remarkable. For perspective, consider our estimates of missing girls at birth for India: 184,000 per year. For girls aged 0-1, it is 146,000 per year. Total maternal mortality for Indian women 15-44 is 131,000 per year. Compare these estimates to those for missing unmarried women (15-69) in India: 231,000 per year.

These estimates call for targeted policies to directly address the extreme discrimination faced by widows in developing countries. In 2011, the U.N. declared June 23rd as International Widows Day. That step was symbolic but important, with the declared aim of drawing international attention to the long-term fight for the basic rights and dignity of widows, and for bringing the unique experiences and needs of widows to the forefront. In the 2021 version of their resolution, the U.N. emphasizes how armed conflicts, displacement and migration, and pandemics (including COVID-19) have left tens of thousands of women newly widowed each year.

The legal asymmetries that persist across gender are particularly distressing. In most countries, widows are still not guaranteed equal inheritance rights. Figure 1 depicts these inequities. For 21% of countries, statutory law discriminates against widows. For 42% of countries, the statutory law guarantees equal rights, but there are customary, traditional or religious practices that discriminate against widows. We are left with just 37% of the world’s countries with equal rights for widows and widowers.

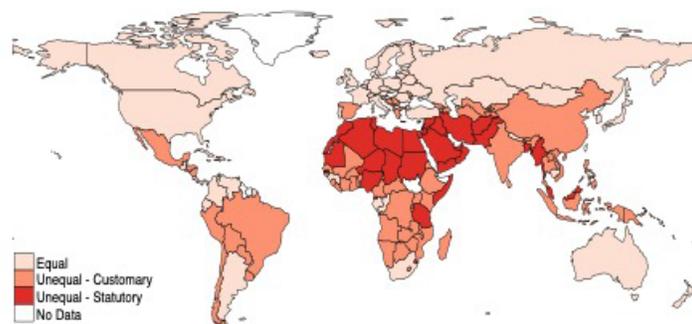
Calling for a change in norms and customs and attitudes is easier said than done. But there is absolutely no reason for the law to be discriminatory. Statutory legal protections for widows’ property rights—those that routinely override discriminatory custom or informal law—is of paramount importance. We would add that extensive outreach services are also necessary in countries with low government penetration in rural areas and urban slums, where information is limited and the economic and social strains on widows are greatest.

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Figure 1. Widow vs Widower Inheritance. Data Source: OECD: Gender, Institutions and Development Database 2014 (GID-DB).



## References

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