

# Survival Strategies of Young Widows to Strive in Their Social Environment

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**Abstract**—The community tends to have negative perceptions towards widowhood which leads to discriminatory treatments. The focus of this study illustrates the strategy of young widows in the District of Sukun in Malang City to strive in their social environment. The design of this research was phenomenology with interpretive paradigm which refers to Edmun Husserl's theory. In-depth interviews and observation were employed to collect the data. To analyze the data, four stages of analysis were used that include collecting and organizing data, followed by the data reduction stage and data refinement stage, and ended in naturalistic generalization and data compilation. The results of this study reveal some strategies used by the young widows in an effort to survive in the social environment. These include being apathetic about the environment, looking for other men, asking for help from clergyman (*kyai*), maintaining attractive appearances to avoid being underestimated, and focusing on work. The findings suggest that policy makers in the community should pay close attention to the existence of widows and discriminatory treatment they receive. This paper also outlines several strategies that young widows use in their efforts to survive and adapt to the social environment.

**Keywords**—widow, divorce, survival strategies.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Widows are women who no longer have a legal spouse due to the death of a husband or a divorce. Divorce is a learning process in a family life [1]. Some factors that cause divorce include terminal illness [2], women's education and employment level [3], domestic violence [4], the presence of mistress [5], and gambling [6]. In most European countries, increasing public welfare actually causes high rates of divorce [7]. A study states that a married couple who gets divorce is proven to increase the risk of divorce in their children and their offspring [8]. In addition, the age of marriage can also lead to divorce, for there is a negative relationship between the age of marriage and the quality of marriage. [9]

Divorce will have a lot of impact on a woman with her new status as a widow. After getting divorced women will experience problems with economic difficulties [10] [11], contributions in the social environment, and lack of support and assistance from other parties [10]. The widows will experience a shift in welfare due to changes in income levels [12] [13]. In addition, divorce also has an impact on emotional, physiological, cognitive, individual behavior and strategies for completing housework [14]. Not only that, children are also victims of parental divorce, resulting in the decline in the children's health [15].

Post-divorce family welfare will be different from families with complete parents. [12]. To overcome economic problems after divorce, most husbands in America provide social security for their ex-wife [16]. The existence of LPB (social security in marriage in Japan) makes the majority of widows unconcerned about their economic condition after divorce [17]. In Russia the majority of widows continue to work as farmers on agricultural land they own or from her husband's inheritance. [18] It also applies to widows in Finland who still have the right to assets of wealth given by their ex-husband or their children after divorce [19].

In addition to social and economic problems, fulfilling their sexuality needs also become one of the problems faced by a widow. However, based on the experience of older widows, they no longer concern with their sexual needs. [20]. There are also many negative consequences of divorce that affect children. [21] This is so, for a widow will approach her children's education differently. Moreover, the emotional stability of a widow is more uncontrolled after divorce. [22] A widow is expected to be able to control emotions due to stress in order to provide comfort and happiness to her children.

Widows are part of a high-risk society and personalized in their social relations [23]. Widows in communities in developing countries, such as Indonesia, are forced to become leaders. [24]. Many attempts are made by

a widow to survive after divorce. To eliminate the feeling of trauma, a widow prefers to survive alone to minimize the chance of meeting her ex-husband [25]. To avoid various social problems, not a few widows move out of their home to hide their status, some of which even move to the countryside and sell the property they own [18]. Widows in China prefer to become immigrants in order to eliminate their past experiences because emotional support is needed for widows [6].

Being a widow is not a form of gender, but a choice that requires them to be active and have a strategy as a woman who plays a dual role [26]. Children are a source of energy for a woman to fulfill emotional needs and maintain family happiness. [27]. As a widow, a woman is required to be able to adapt to balance between domestic and public roles, for they must act as the head of the family even though some choose to live with their parents [28]. Each of them has their own way and strategy in living life as a single parent, and chooses to keep working. [18]

Being a widow is often described as a traumatic experience for many people [26]. The loss of identity will strike women who are newly widowed [26]. The term widow, regardless of social class, is a disgrace. This is so, for it is assumed that marital status is an honor for a woman [29]. Many pros and cons arise regarding the perception of the status of someone who is a widow in the community because in some communities the marriage is only to improve economic status [29].

Socially, Indonesian people generally still view the status of widows negatively. Speaking of widowhood, it is inseparable from the structure of Indonesian society that still adheres to patriarchal culture, namely the concept that men hold power over all important roles in society. Consequently, the existence of widows is not valuable in society. However, in fact in the last 3 years the number of widows has increased, especially in Malang City. In Sukun Sub-district, Malang City, there is one village locally known as the Widow Village. In this village, there were 116 widows. The widow is grouped into widowed women and divorced widows. The widows due to divorce were 22 people, generally still young. The cause of their divorce is due to infidelity and domestic violence. In Western countries, divorce cases have increased very sharply due to increased welfare of the population [7]. The higher level of education and employment of a woman is also a cause of divorce [3]. On the other hand, the rampant divorce cases in Indonesia are more due to cases of infidelity, poor family economy and domestic violence. It is also due to a low level of public education.

Various studies have been carried out related to the existence of widowhood, related to the causes of the increasing number of widows [7], [2], [3], [8], [6] and widow strategies in meeting their economic needs as single parents [18], [16], [28], [17], [19]. However, there have been no studies that explain the strategies of young widows in their efforts to survive in their social environment. Hence, this paper focuses on what strategies employed by the widows to strive for their life in the social environment. The interpretive paradigm in Edmund Husserl's perspective is used, which is to take meaning out of the life experience of each person. Only through the act of conceiving awareness can one touch the world as a regular structure.

## II. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed phenomenological design to explore information in depth and subjectively. The subjects of this study were divorced widows, who already had children and whose level of education was high school. To collect the data, observation and in-depth interviews were employed. To analyze the data, some steps were done, namely, collecting and organizing data, reducing the data (finding general patterns of data derived from specific findings), refining the data, and developing naturalistic generalizations and compilation of the data.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### A. *Strategies used by young widows to strive for life in their social environment*

Widowhood poses severe emotional challenges for women because there is no woman who plans her way of life to be a widow, either because of the death of a husband or divorce with his life partner. Negative community perceptions also sometimes arise social problems in relation to the existence of widows. The patriarchal structure that is still held by most of these people often results in a conflict. A person's status can affect her relationship or interaction in society. Widowhood in this case tends to bear lots of disadvantages due to their state of independency, for their behavior and movement is always in the public spotlight. The state of widowhood instills fears among the women and in Malang City the number of widows increased. District of Sukun is the area with the highest number of widows in Malang City. The high number of widows is due to the high rate of divorce. Low levels of education and economic community lead to infidelity and domestic violence in families which ends in divorce.

Women who become widows at a relatively young age due to divorce are often regarded as poor women by the community. The rumor and negative news about the "young widow" will soon spread in the community. To cope with such challenges, an effort to strive for life is carried out.

### B. *Being more apathetic about the community*

Apathy is the attitude of someone who only cares about something that she considers important and does not care about something that is not important to her. Actually in the field of psychology, apathy tends to be negative because it is detrimental. The apathy tends to emerge due to two things: it is due to a small environment that does not give the person the opportunity to socialize more and it is due to an experience of disappointment about something.

In the society, the existence of widowhood is viewed with special attention by the community. In many cases divorced widows tend to get a negative response, especially on the part of mothers. It is probably because they think that a widow is synonymous with the word loneliness, a woman who needs a man for a friend, and they assume the average divorced widow is a woman who is morally questionable labelled with various negative attributes. Yet, some young widows are strong and able to encourage themselves to survive. Being apathetic by not caring about the words of those around makes young widows stronger in living their lives: *I prefer to be apathetic about the environment so that I can immediately rise from this problem. I ignore bad comments and cynical views from neighbors because I feel that this does not do good for my life.* (RI, 28)

Negative treatments and comments are often received by widows from their neighborhood: *Some co-workers who do not like me often comment harshly, saying widows are lonely women who cannot channel their desires. But now my heart becomes more immune and goes deaf (apathy) towards others. "So widowhood does not mean doomsday right? There are still many things to do and think about. Not having a husband is okay.* (NG: 29)

The apathetic attitude showed by RI and NG is to not bother with the words and attitudes of the surrounding community who consider widowhood to be shameful. It is to immediately rise from adversity and lift up the spirit by believing that being a widow is not a disaster, which makes all the wheels of life have to stop. Widowhood can even be a whip for women to try better in socializing with the environment. Widows as single parents will work harder for the happiness of their children. Hardiness is closely related to a widow signifying a woman who is strong willed as they face various problems. Learning from their life experience enables widows to be strong and mature in facing many problems. In line with Husserl's view that subjective experience is our personal experience as a human who lives a life. Every human being will have their own way of dealing with problems. Being apathetic is a way to gain back their confidence after facing severe problems.

In Husserl's opinion the human experience is actually an expression of consciousness. Every form of consciousness is a person's awareness in understanding her experience. Interpretive theory according to Edmund Husserl relies on one's view of the situation at hand. Every human being has the right to form their own views which will determine their attitude. Therefore, interpretive paradigm is very appreciative of a person's freedom in interpreting the experience she experiences. This was demonstrated by RI and NG in responding to the behavior of people around their environment.

Apathy is the attitude chosen to be able to survive the widowhood in the social environment.

#### C. *Looking for a lover*

The divorce for a widow will surely leave a sense of trauma to women. It takes a very long time to relieve the feeling of trauma. However, starting to open heart to other men can sometimes also relieve sadness. This is so, for basically a young widow still needs attention from a partner. NG stated (29): *I now make a relationship with a man who was introduced by my parents. But I am not intending to marry soon. The reason for accepting the man as a lover is because I feel comfortable now someone is watching and loving me again.* This is similar to what KK (31) said: *I now have a boyfriend and he is a soldier. The army is strict and disciplined so it is impossible for him to cheat.*

From the data above, it can be interpreted that feelings of trauma or fear of being disappointed must be in the mind of a widow. Their closeness to the new man is only considered as an escape from their sadness. Another reason is the focus of their life which is no longer on their personal happiness but on the child's happiness. Therefore, most widows are reluctant to get married again.

It is in accordance with Edmund Husserl's opinion about the theory of subjectivity. Someone has her own way of understanding the life experiences she has experienced. The decision of NG and KK to accept other men is an attempt to eliminate trauma and grief after divorce. This strategy may be different from what other widows do. Yet, this is a form of subjectivity in choosing how to interpret one's own life experience.

#### D. *Seeing clergyman*

Various strategies are taken by someone so that they are free from the problems they face. To end the suffering soon, even the unusual way is done. In the rural environment, people with a low educational background, or even middle-class economics, go to clerics or what they call 'people with visions' to find a solution to the problems they face. NG stated (28): *My parents had asked for a solution to a cleric. He gave them a bottle of water and asked me to drink it every time I finished praying. My parents said it could help me cope with the divorce.* KK also shared the similar experience (31): *My parents also asked for help from the cleric so that the divorce problem was immediately resolved. The media given by the cleric was salt which my father then put around our house.*

Most Malang people still trust the vision of the cleric or *kyai* to provide solutions to their problems. *Kyai* intended in this paper is a figure who is considered important in society and is believed to be able to give a way out of problems, cure illnesses, and give powerful prayers because

of the high level of knowledge he has. The media given by the *kyai* are very diverse, which includes for example giving a prayer practice, spreading salt around the house, or even giving an item to the person who bears the problem. Drinking water is also one of the media that is given by the *kyai* to the people affected by illness or depression. Most Javanese people consider *kyai* as someone who can provide a way out of a problem or even cure for the illness.

Edmund Husserl reveals that the structure of experience is the way humans organize their reality to become integrated and authentic. For Husserl, life provides the basics of cultural harmony and rules that determine the beliefs that are taken for granted in a system of systematic behavior. In the case of NG and their families, it manifests in the traditional beliefs held in their community in relation to the vision of the cleric to solve the problems.

#### *E. Maintaining attractive appearances to avoid being looked down*

Having attractive appearance is sought after by widows so that they can be appreciated or can be easily accepted in new communities. RI acknowledged this point (28): *When you look beautiful you are not underestimated by others and it shows that you no longer grieve over the state of widowhood.* DY also made effort to look attractive (34), not by applying makeup but by wearing new and expensive items: *By always appearing attractive using clothes, bags, good shoes, you are not underestimated by others.*

Appealing to widows is by applying makeup and wearing good and expensive items such as clothes, bags, shoes and accessories. By looking attractive RI and DY feel more easily accepted in their social environment and also feel not underestimated because they are considered women who do not have income because no one else supports them. Attractive appearance implies a happy heart, so that they are not considered grieving with their status of widowhood. Maintaining an appearance with expensive accessories also implies good economic conditions, so that widows are more confident in socializing with their environment.

Edmund Husserl assumes that every human being has their own experience that shapes their personality. Hence, interpretive paradigm highly respects a person's freedom in interpreting the experience she experiences. It is because actions are based on the awareness of beliefs about important values such as aesthetics will influence the behavior and reaction of the surrounding community in their lives.

#### *F. Getting back to work and staying focus*

Living the state of widowhood poses a lot of dilemma, so that they need mental strength and all activities more valued by society in living their

lives. Socializing and starting to open up to other environments is a way to forget the problems at hand. One way to achieve this is to start working. In addition to financially support the family, it is also to eliminate the problems they face. It is revealed by RI (28) who is a teacher: *Being at work and meeting students can make me forget all the problems for a moment.*

It is in line with what was conveyed by KK (31), after officially divorced trying to return to her old workplace. For her divorce is not a doomsday, for there are still children who have a long life. *"After returning to my parents' home, working is the best choice to be able to fill the time with things that are useful and it can eliminate the sadness".*

Working for RI and KK is a routine that can make them forget about their new status as a widow. Working environment they are in does not look at their social status. Another reason for working is economic factors. This is the main reason why widows choose to work. By working they can meet their children's needs and fulfill their own satisfaction, where their lives no longer depend on others.

In synergy with Edmund Husserl's opinion concerning reduction, humans find an essence of consciousness called intentionality. Every intentional activity (noetic) includes the activity of realizing something that will shape someone at the point of awareness. As in the case of RI and KK, intensive activities such as work will make them able to survive and adapt to the social environment after bearing the status of widowhood.

## IV. CONCLUSION

The state of widowhood is linked to a variety of negative perceptions in the community. Hence, a widow needs to have a strategy to survive in her social environment. The results of this study reveal some strategies used by widows in order to survive in their social environment. These include being apathetic about the environment, opening their hearts by welcoming other men, maintain attractive appearance to prevent from being underestimated, and focusing on work. These strategies are attempts made by young widows to be able to rise from the problem of divorce so that they can adapt to the social environment with their new status.

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