



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

## OPEN ACCESS

### SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT OF WIDOWS AFTER CIRCUMSTANTIAL REMARRIAGE (KAREWA) IN HARYANA: A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF AMBALA DISTRICT

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#### ABSTRACT

In the agrarian setting of Haryana, social and cultural norms are largely shaped by the land-owning class, especially those caste that are dominant in terms of social, economic, and demographic strength. Taking into account the various socio-economic factors of the region, the present study attempts to explore the different dimensions of social adjustment in the life of a widow after circumstantial remarriage, and her perspective toward such marriage. Usually, within the family, maintaining the widow's subordinate status serves the purpose of controlling her property, sexuality, and fertility. Widow remarriage is called *Karewa*. The present study analyzes the implications of *Karewa* women's lives from a gendered perspective. It also attempts to understand the condition of those women who are compelled to accept *Karewa* as a social stigma. These women's socio-economic status is deeply affected by the patriarchal structure. The nature of the study is both qualitative and quantitative. It was found that such marriages increase the exploitation of widows, cause difficulties in family adjustment, and lack legal recognition in many cases. It is appropriate to say that a widow faces a double burden in society.

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## INTRODUCTION

Marriage is a universal institution, practiced across all nations, societies, and communities. In religious texts, marriage is considered a sacred sacrament, and from a sociological perspective, it holds an important place in the formation of the basic social unit — the family. Marriage serves multiple purposes: sexual satisfaction, family formation, kinship extension, economic cooperation, and socialization of children. It is an agreement between two or more persons of opposite sex, sanctioned by custom or law, aiming to fulfill sexual, social, and economic interests. Marriage has many forms, one of which is "circumstantial remarriage" — generally, a widow marries her deceased husband's younger brother. This custom is known as *Karewa*, *Chadar Andazi*, or Levirate marriage. Literature review suggests that this form of marriage exists, with slight variations, in almost every society. In India too, Levirate marriage has existed since ancient times across most caste and tribal communities. The death of a husband often leads to mental distress for the widow, and circumstantial remarriage is intended to provide psychological support. However, research shows that in many families, the widow is forced into such remarriage, often against her will, to preserve family property.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review reveals that in most studies, widows were either married to their deceased husband's unmarried brother or, under compulsion, to someone else. However, this particular study focuses only on those widows who were married to their deceased husband's already married brother, whose first wife is still alive.

Literature shows that such cases have rarely been studied extensively. Bidarkoppa, G.S. (1971) states that in India, women are still dependent on their husbands. They lack individual identity due to male dominance in society. After the husband's death, a woman becomes helpless and faces financial hardships. Her life becomes economically unstable, and she is forced to rely on traditional structures like joint families and widow homes. Veena Das (1975) highlighted that after the 1971 Indo-Pak war and the 1984 assassination of Indira Gandhi; many middle-class widows were forced by their in-laws to stay in their marital homes until a suitable remarriage was arranged. Often, they were forced to marry men much older than them, sometimes three times their age, due to social pressure. Jayalakshmi Shakambari (1966) claimed that widowhood is considered a result of bad karma in a past life. Women see themselves as weak and helpless, and hence view their husbands as their ultimate protectors. The death of a husband is thus a deeply painful experience for them. Shorter (2001) states that in levirate marriages, the children born are considered to belong to the deceased husband. In some communities, the widow's family determines who among the family should become her new husband. Bamgbose (2002): Referring to Nigerian society, he found that levirate marriage is still practiced under customary law, wherein a family member inherits the widow and her property. Bamgbose sees this as a contributor to the spread of HIV/AIDS, and calls it disgraceful and harmful. Kavemer (2003) notes that levirate marriages may even be with cousins of the deceased husband. In places like South Africa, it is called "Ukunjena", and due to increasing awareness among women, the practice is declining. Bahemuka and Brockington (2004) emphasize that levirate marriage is a way to bring the widow back into a social

life. She continues to be considered married within the family of the deceased, and her future is decided by that same family.

**Objectives:** Taking into consideration various social and economic factors, the current study aims to explore the different dimensions of circumstantial remarriage (*Karewa*) in Haryana.

The main objectives of this study are:

1. To analyze the social adjustment of women who undergo circumstantial remarriage.
2. To understand the attitudes and perspectives of these women toward such marriages.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods approach using purposive and snowball sampling to select 200 widowed women from Ambala district, Haryana, who had undergone circumstantial remarriage (*Karewa*) to already-married men whose first wives were still alive. Data were collected through structured interviews, case studies, field observations, and group discussions with respondents and their family members. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, field visits played a crucial role in building rapport and gaining trust. Both qualitative and quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS for statistical insights and MS Word for organizing qualitative narratives, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the practice and its social implications.

**Data Analysis:** To understand the socio-cultural realities and psychological experiences of widows undergoing circumstantial remarriage (*Karewa*) in Haryana, the present study employed both quantitative and qualitative data collected from 200 respondents in Ambala district. The following section presents a systematic analysis of the data, highlighting the educational background, economic conditions, familial structures, personal choices, and social experiences of the respondents. Through statistical tables and narrative interpretations, the analysis reveals critical insights into the patterns of consent, satisfaction, adjustment, and exploitation that define the lived experiences of women within this deeply rooted customary practice.

**Table 1. Educational Level of Respondents**

Educational Level	Frequency	Percentage
Illiterate	105	52.5%
Up to Primary	35	17.5%
Up to Middle School	18	9.0%
Up to High School (Matric)	17	8.5%
Senior Secondary or Equivalent	20	10.0%
Graduate and Above	5	2.5%
Total	200	100.0%

A majority of respondents (52.5%) are illiterate, which limits their decision-making autonomy and access to information. Low education levels contribute to dependency on family elders, making them more vulnerable to forced remarriage.

**Table 2 Age of Husband at the Time of Death**

Age Group (Years)	Frequency	Percentage
Below 20	12	6.0%
20–25	57	28.5%
26–30	67	33.5%
31–35	36	18.0%
36–40	25	12.5%
Above 40	3	1.5%
Total	200	100.0%

The above table shows that most deceased husbands were young; 62% were aged between 20 and 30 at the time of death, indicating early widowhood. These women are likely to have young children and economic needs, making them susceptible to pressure for remarriage to preserve family property.

**Table 3. Did You Consent to the Second Marriage?**

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	66	33.0%
No	134	67.0%
Total	200	100.0%

Two-thirds (67%) of respondents did not consent to the remarriage, reflecting a violation of bodily and marital autonomy.

**Table 4. If No, Why Did You Agree to the Marriage?**

Reason	Frequency	Percentage
Family/relatives' pressure	41	20.5%
Pressure from widow's own parents	32	16.0%
To protect social reputation	34	17.0%
For children's future	27	13.5%
Not applicable (those who agreed)	66	33.0%
Total	200	100.0%

The above table shows that decisions were driven by family pressure, social honor, and children's future—not by personal desire. The idea of "honor" and lineage in patriarchal rural societies often outweighs individual freedom, especially for widows.

**Table 5. Are You Satisfied with the Second Marriage?**

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	71	35.5%
No	129	64.5%
Total	200	100.0%

The above data shows that 64.5% respondents are not satisfied, questioning emotional or social incompatibility in these forced remarriages.

**Table 6. If Yes, Why?**

Reason	Frequency	Percentage
For family security	10	5.0%
For raising children	23	11.5%
To avoid hardships	6	3.0%
To maintain social respect	11	5.5%
To uphold family reputation	11	5.5%
Because of mutual affection (sisters-in-law)	5	2.5%
To continue the deceased husband's lineage	5	2.5%
Not applicable	129	64.5%
Total	200	100.0%

The above data depicts that even satisfied respondents were motivated by practical needs (security, child-rearing), not emotional attachment. So, the institution of marriage becomes a means of survival rather than a social or emotional bond.

**Table 7. If Not Satisfied, Why?**

Reason	Frequency	Percentage
Tensions with the first wife	4	2.0%
Had to live in natal home after second marriage	10	5.0%
Consent not taken for the remarriage	13	6.5%
Children received less care after marriage	33	16.5%
Increase in responsibilities	24	12.0%
Family disputes and expenses increased	10	5.0%
Fear of emotional mismatch with second husband	7	3.5%
Fear of losing deceased husband's property	28	14.0%
Not applicable	71	35.5%
Total	200	100.0%

The above table highlights the issues like neglect of children, loss of inheritance, and unwanted responsibilities suggest that remarriage often intensifies the widow's burdens.

**Table 8. Did You Face Any Difficulty in Establishing Marital Relations with the Second Husband?**

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	108	54.0%
No	92	46.0%
Total	200	100.0%

Over half of the widows (54%) faced difficulties in establishing physical or emotional intimacy with their second husbands—highlighting a lack of emotional compatibility or personal comfort in such forced remarriages.

**Table 9. If Yes, What Kind of Difficulties?**

Reason	Frequency	Percentage
Husband emotionally attached to his first wife	39	19.5%
First wife was more beautiful	9	4.5%
Personal or domestic conflicts	12	6.0%
Received less attention/time from husband	29	14.5%
Physical distance between residences	13	6.5%
Suppression of desires due to grown-up children	6	3.0%
Not applicable	92	46.0%
Total	200	100.0%

The major issue was the husband's emotional inclination toward his first wife, followed by lack of time or attention, and domestic tensions—indicating that many second wives feel neglected and secondary in their marriage.

**Table 10. Do Both Wives Live in the Same House with the Husband?**

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	75	37.5%
No	125	62.5%
Total	200	100.0%

A majority (62.5%) of respondents do not live with the first wife under one roof—indicating segregation in family structure, likely due to tension, lack of space, or deliberate separation.

**Table 11. If No, Why?**

Reason	Frequency	Percentage
Due to mutual discord	17	8.5%
New house after children's marriage	46	23.0%
To maintain personal authority	5	2.5%
Separate houses already existed	47	23.5%
Husband's government job at a different place	6	3.0%
One wife at in-laws' and the other at her maternal home	4	2.0%
Not applicable	75	37.5%
Total	200	100.0%

Common reasons for living separately include post-marriage housing arrangements and existing separation. A significant number (23.5%) had pre-existing separate homes, indicating preplanned familial division.

**Table 12. Was Any Formal Ceremony Held for the Second Marriage?**

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	187	93.5%
No	13	6.5%
Total	200	100.0%

Almost all remarriages were informally formalized through local customs or symbolic rituals, showing cultural but not legal legitimacy.

**Table 13: If Yes, What Type of Ceremony?**

Ceremony Type	Frequency	Percentage
Coconut and hand-holding in presence of panchayat & family	38	19.0%
Exchange of a pair of clothes before relatives	145	72.5%
Full wedding rituals including 'pheras' and 'dupatta'	4	2.0%
Not applicable	13	6.5%
Total	200	100.0%

Most remarriages occurred through symbolic gestures like clothing exchange, not full wedding rites—suggesting low ceremonial and emotional significance.

**Table 14. Was the Second Marriage Legally Registered?**

Response	Frequency	Percentage
No	200	100.0%

None of the second marriages were legally registered—highlighting legal invisibility and potential exploitation. It also ensures the widow can continue receiving widow pensions.

**Table 15. Are the Relations between Both Wives Cordial Outside the Home?**

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	71	35.5%
No	129	64.5%
Total	200	100.0%

Around two-thirds of the women reported strained or non-cordial relations, indicating underlying emotional conflict and social rivalry between co-wives.

**Table 16. If Not, What Kind of Problems?**

Issue	Frequency	Percentage
Personal disagreements	45	22.5%
Family disputes	71	35.5%
Property conflicts	13	6.5%
Not applicable	71	35.5%
Total	200	100.0%

According to the above data most problems arise from family-level disagreements and disputes, while property conflicts also appear as a significant source of tension. Conflicts due to property, decision-making, and household responsibilities are central. These reflect structural inequality within polygynous settings.

**Table 17. Do You Feel the Second Marriage Has Become an Unnecessary Burden?**

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	116	58.0%
No	84	42.0%
Total	200	100.0%

More than half of the respondents feel burdened by the second marriage—implying emotional, physical, or financial strain.

**Table 18. If Yes, Why?**

Reason	Frequency	Percentage
Increase in family size	25	12.5%
Increase in expenses	31	15.5%
Rise in family disputes	13	6.5%
Dislike for second husband	2	1.0%
Consent was not taken	17	8.5%
Lack of time and attention from husband	28	14.0%
Not applicable	84	42.0%
Total	200	100.0%

The above data shows that increased expenses and lack of spousal support are major stressors. Lack of consent also emerges as a critical issue in women's autonomy. These are classic indicators of exploitation masked as family duty.

**Table 19. Do You Think These Marriages Are Mismatched (Incompatible)?**

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	137	68.5%
No	63	31.5%
Total	200	100.0%

Almost 70% believe these marriages are mismatched—validating emotional and social incompatibility.

**Table 20. If Yes, Why?**

Reason	Frequency	Percentage
Age difference	28	14.0%
Differences in mindset	26	13.0%
Poor adjustment between wives	34	17.0%
Property disputes	14	7.0%
Emotional instability	17	8.5%
Poor childcare in large families	18	9.0%
Not applicable	63	31.5%
Total	200	100.0%

The above table shows that issues like age gaps, psychological mismatches, and intra-family tension are primary reasons behind incompatibility.

**Table 21. Do You Think Such Marriages Preserve Social Harmony?**

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	175	87.5%
No	25	12.5%
Total	200	100.0%

Most believe such marriages preserve family structure, reputation, and avoid property division, even if they are personally challenging.

**Table 22. If Yes, How?**

Reason	Frequency	Percentage
Maintains family reputation	55	27.5%
Ensures family unity	13	6.5%
Promotes harmony in social relationships	20	10.0%
Protects widow and children socially	40	20.0%
Prevents property division	11	5.5%
Continues deceased husband's lineage	36	18.0%
Not applicable	25	12.5%
Total	200	100.0%

**Table 23. Do You Believe These Marriages Promote Exploitation of Women?**

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	147	73.5%
No	53	26.5%
Total	200	100.0%

A large majority (73.5%) believe that such marriages promote the exploitation of women—making it a socially problematic practice.

**Table 24. If Yes, How?**

Form of Exploitation	Frequency	Percentage
Domestic violence	37	18.5%
Extra household responsibilities	12	6.0%
Neglect by husband	11	5.5%
Forced conjugal relations	24	12.0%
Denial of basic needs	24	12.0%
No control over property	21	10.5%
Lack of dignity and respect	12	6.0%
Exclusion from family/social events	6	3.0%
Not applicable	53	26.5%
Total	200	100.0%

This table paints a stark picture of systemic exploitation—emotionally, physically, sexually, and economically—masked under the label of “family duty.” Though *Karewa* is culturally accepted, the data proves it acts as a mechanism to control widows, especially when they are: Economically dependent, Legally uninformed, Socially isolated.

## CONCLUSION

The study reveals that in the social structure of Haryana, a woman is still largely seen as an extension of a man's identity and property, rather than as an independent individual. A widow, in particular, is rarely allowed to make decisions about her life. The custom of *Karewa* (circumstantial remarriage)—although socially accepted—continues to be a deeply patriarchal practice designed more to preserve lineage, property, and family prestige than to ensure the

well-being of the woman involved. Although most respondents followed the practice of *Karewa* out of social and familial pressure, they lacked genuine consent, and in many cases were coerced to avoid being seen as impure, dishonorable, or a burden on the family. This form of remarriage, therefore, often leads to double exploitation: emotionally, as the woman is often denied companionship and respect; and materially, as she is used to safeguard family property and legacy.

The findings highlight several concerning patterns:

- None of the *Karewa* marriages in the study were legally registered, which makes these unions invisible in the eyes of the law, and robs women of legal rights, including inheritance, protection from abuse, and eligibility for government schemes.
- More than two-thirds of the women did not consent to the second marriage and expressed dissatisfaction with it.
- More than half experienced difficulties in physical or emotional relationships with their new husbands, and many reported conflicts with the first wife.
- The primary motivations for the family to enforce *Karewa* were property retention, social respect, and avoiding fragmentation of inheritance.
- The majority of women perceived these marriages as exploitative, citing domestic violence, lack of dignity, increased burden, and social isolation.

While a significant number of respondents agreed that *Karewa* helps in maintaining the social fabric, this belief stems more from internalized norms and survival pressures than from personal or emotional satisfaction. The emotional and mental toll on these women is severe, yet silently endured under the guise of tradition and duty.

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