

“I AM A WIDOW, POOR AND LIVING IN A VILLAGE”: WHAT’S CHANGED AFTER THE BEIJING DECLARATION IN RURAL INDONESIA?

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Abstract: Widows in rural Indonesia, tethered by the invisible threads of tradition, navigate a landscape where patriarchal norms cast long shadows over their autonomy and rights. This article explores the experience of three widows living in three villages in rural West Java, Central Java, and Central Kalimantan. It examines how their lives have changed since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration 30 years ago. Using a narrative approach, the research zooms into the personal stories of these women to understand their experiences with social attitudes, their role within the community, and their strategies for dealing with economic deprivation. Observation and in-depth interviews were conducted to collect the data. The result portrays that although the Beijing Declaration has brought positive changes such as improved access to economic opportunity, and education for their family, significant challenges persist. By highlighting the resilience and agency of these women as they navigate and challenge the patriarchal structure, the study emphasizes the urgency of social support and legal reforms in strengthening their socio-economic status. Through the widows’s narrative, this paper tells both progress and persistent struggles, manifesting a nuanced perspective on the impact of international gender equality commitment at the grassroots level. These unique experiences of widows in rural Indonesia contribute to the broader discourse on pursuing gender equality in the rural context, as well as provide recommendations for marching the Beijing Declaration.

Keyword: widow, gender discrimination, Beijing declaration, rural Indonesia, economic empowerment, narrative inquiry

Introduction

Widows living in rural communities are always bombarded by a never-ending social negative stigma, and those who have economic barriers suffer even worse. The term “janda” or widow in Bahasa Indonesia always gives an immediate stigma when the local community hears or talks about the term in daily conversation (Riyanto & Afdholy, 2024; Shofi, 2022). This arises due to the assumption that widows, as a greedy woman (want to seize a man’s property), not able to produce a newborn, has affairs, and is flirtatious; they even prefer to use other terms such as “perempuan single” or “tidak bersuami” or single woman (Sofyan & Bakhri, 2021). With the stigma following their identity, widows often found hardship in finding decent work (Rofi, 2023; Subair et al., 2023), especially in the context of Indonesia, where the majority of widows are not participating in the high level of formal education (Pujihasyuty et al., 2021). They ended up earning money in the sector with high risk and instability, such as street traders, household assistants, laborers (Subair et al., 2023), sex workers (Hung, 2023), and so forth. This reflects an agony revealing the absence of strategic intervention (Tomaro et al., 2021) to support women nonetheless, women who struggle alone in taking care of their children and family amidst the various social discrimination and poverty.

Thirty years ago, through the Fourth World Conference on Women in September 1995, around 17 stakeholders and 30.000 activists from around the globe gathered in Beijing with the same mission: gender equality and empowerment of women. That moment is known as The Beijing Declaration and

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Platform for Action (BPfA), and identified 12 critical areas of concern and set forth strategic objectives and action to address the systemic barriers faced by women in every corner of the world including women and poverty, education and training, health, violence against women, women and armed conflict, women and the economy, women in power and decision-making, institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women, human rights of women, women and the media, women and the environment, and the girl-child (UN, 1995). Toward the Ministry of Women Empowerment and Child Protection (Kementrian Pemberdayaan Perempuan dan Perlindungan Anak), for these five years Indonesia claimed the good deed in pursuing gender equality and women empowerment toward the increasing Gender Development Index (GDI) by 91.85% in 2023 as well as the Gender Empowerment Index (GEI) becomes 79.90%, issuance of UU TPKS/Undang-undang Tindak Pidana Kekerasan Seksual (Sexual Violence Criminal Act), UU Kesejahteraan Ibu dan Anak pada Fase Seribu Hari Pertama Kehidupan/ UU KIA (The Law on Maternal and Child Health in the First Thousand Days of Life, prioritization of women as recipients of social protection program (Program Keluarga Harapan/PKH) and others social assistance such as Bantuan Pangan Non-Tunai/BPNT (Non-Cash Food Assistance Program), Jaminan Kesehatan Nasional/ JKN (the National Health Insurance), and community awareness campaign to combat social stigma and promote inclusion of women in public life (UN Women, 2024). However, despite some "paper" advancements initiated by government programs, the enduring stigma and the lack of long-term impactful intervention underscore a significant gap in policy implementation. The research from (Kanyongolo, 2020) highlights the drawback in delivering the BPfA in the grassroots network, she argues for better support for local feminists in pursuing gender equality and inclusion.

This study seeks to unveil myriad challenges at the grassroots level by looking into the lived experiences of three widows in three rural communities in Indonesia using a narrative inquiry approach, particularly the prevailing social stigma that often hinders them from the periphery of public life. The backdrop of this research is framed within the broader context of governmental and non-governmental interventions. By scrutinizing women's strategies for coping with poverty and their livelihood, this study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of widows' resilience and agency. This paper contributes to linking the global commitment, like the Beijing Declaration, with the issue of widowhood in the discourse of gender and poverty, which remained unexplored. It also underscores the voice of widows living in rural areas, which led to meaningful and sustainable intervention that will answer their needs, as well as to dismantle deep-rooted stigmas and structural barriers that perpetuate the cycle of poverty among widows.

Method

Narrative inquiry values individual journeys as a source of knowledge, it is a research method that scrutinizes human lives with the spectacle of narrative or storytelling (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). This paper employed narrative inquiry to explore the personal experiences of three widows living in rural Indonesia in three different regions (West Java, Central Java, and Central Kalimantan). The method answered the author's need to dive into the personal stories and experiences of women, as Creswell (2014) elaborated that the narrative inquiry provides rich and contextual insights about the lives of research participants. By using observation and in-depth interviews, this research focuses on

investigating how rural society treats widows, how widows navigate their participation in the public domain and their strategies for dealing with economic deprivation. In addition, this study also sought to find any government and non-government intervention that has impacted their lives, particularly since the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

The study started with field observation over three years during the author's job as a facilitator in the year 2019-2022 in three different provinces in Indonesia. This long association with women living in rural Indonesia led the author to conduct a special investigation about mothers who struggle alone in taking care of their families amid the challenge of patriarchy and poverty. Moreover, from February to April 2024, the author piloted in-depth interviews using phone calling to three widows in Pabuaran village (Subang, West Java), Kendalrejo village (Pemalang, Central Java) and Purbasari village (West Kotawaringin, Central Kalimantan) in gathering their detailed personal narratives. The three women were selected using selective sampling, a technique where the researcher chose individuals who are knowledgeable or experienced with the topic of interest (Creswell & Poth, 2013). Each conversation was conducted using semi-structured questions, allowing research participants to share their experiences deliberately. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns in the data. To validate the findings, member checking was used to review and confirm the accuracy of the initial analysis by asking for participants' confirmation.

Result and Discussion

Participants of this study consist of three single mothers or widows with divergent backgrounds of age, education and experiences. The first is NM (25 years old), who knocked the not right after her senior high graduation. She lives in Pabuaran village, a rural area in northern Subang-West Java. A young single mother with 6 years old son, was divorced from her husband a year after their marriage. She inhabited a small house in a slum area on the edge of an irrigation river which was inherited from her mother, who was also a widow (died in 2020). The second is SK, 45 years old who lives in Kendalrejo village, Pemalang Regency, Central Java. For 10 years being a widow, she has been living with her daughter and sons. The two sons who one of them already married, and another is in the first year of elementary school. Meanwhile, the daughter (14 years old) is on 2nd year of Junior High School. The last is SN, 60 years old, who has struggled alone since the death of her husband in the year 2009. She has been living in a small house in a rural area named Purbasari (West Kotawaringin Regency) in Central Kalimantan. She has two children, a son (who died at the age of 30 in 2016) and a daughter (28 years old). The main themes that emerged were the experience of the three of them in dealing with social attitudes toward widows, public domain participation, and economic deprivation as well as the association with social assistance from the government and private sector.

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Initial	NM	SK	SN
Age	24	45	60
Origin	West Java	Central Java	Central Kalimantan
Number of Children	1	3	2
Widowhood	6 years	10 years	16 years

A narrative inquiry approach was used to explore the lived experiences of low-income single mothers or widows in rural Indonesia. The study utilized a life course orientation to track the three widows' personal experiences, transitions, and trajectories. The research suggests that several events and experiences have negatively influenced and tilted transitions and trajectories in the lives of poor widows in rural West Java, Central Java, and Central Kalimantan. The study shows how the widows' experiences are linked to social attitudes toward them. Furthermore, despite the exposure to social negative stigma, economic deprivation, and limited social assistance, they survived navigating their life by confining themselves from interacting with society and seeking livelihood far from home.

The never-ending merciless negative stigma

The women reported experiencing verbal and physical harassment as well as negative stigma from their neighbourhood regarding her status as a widow. As narrated by 60 years old SJ, she always felt ignored and belittled by society. She reported that almost 17 years duration being a widow, society never changed in treating her like an outsider or a threat. Be it government employees, neighbors, women-mothers, and even family members, she found herself being treated unkindly. She remarked:

"I have been living in the house I live in now since I married my husband. So, this is a house that my husband gave me and my children. The house is far from my family, making my relationship with them strained. They believe that my life is fine just because my late husband gave me a house. Every time I ask for help when I am in trouble, they barely help. The attitude of the neighbors is the same, they think that I am a well-off widow who inherited a house. . . The saddest thing is the attitude of my neighboring mothers who are always afraid that I will steal their husbands every time I interact (even unintentionally) with their husbands. The RT even reprimanded me for watching my behavior."

The other women share an identical experience in terms of being treated like a threat by society, particularly (ironically) by their women-friends. This happened more frequently to a younger single mother, they even reported experiencing being sexually abused by a man (a husband), yet were still accused as a flirtatious woman, as illustrated by NM (25):

"I used to shop for daily necessities at the shop next to my house. It was not uncommon when the person who guarding the shop was the man (the husband of the seller), I often experienced sexual violence, he glanced at sensitive body parts, and once touched my buttocks and thighs. I was very scared. Since then, I only dared to shop when the woman (the wife of the seller) was guarding. However, I did not know that the woman was always cold. Until one day, my aunt told me that the woman who sold the shop asked her to tell me not to flirt her husband."

She added the story of her mother who was also a widow:

"Mother died at a relatively young age (57 years old), she was a hard worker who raised three children alone, and she even helped her parents' family economy. This was not

because mother had a lot of money, but because she went abroad to work as a domestic worker for 2 years, at that time my siblings and I were entrusted to my grandmother. Even so, her struggle was never appreciated . . . the saddest thing is, just because mother was a woman, she did not receive an inheritance from her parents (which was actually the result of her hard work)”

In another case, SK (45), who worked as a domestic helper, was always advised by her family and friends to behave properly while working, especially when her male employer was at home. She feels sad because she is always positioned as the "wrong one", only because of her preference in taking care of her appearance. She reported:

“Why do you like wearing lipstick so much? Be careful not to wear too much lipstick, or your male boss might take a fancy to you and you could ruin someone else's household.”

When a widow always ends up being “an offender” or “a suspect” because she is considered the guilty party or the abuser of a married husband, this indeed perpetuates misogynistic values and make women believe that they are the guilty party and must be careful of their behavior. Instead of fighting and reporting the men, widows in rural areas opt to accept and act more “politely” as not potentially harassed by men. This happened to a widow, NM (25), she herself is the child of a single mother (her late mother was a widow since she was 4 years old). She admitted that she chose not to fight and report when she experienced sexual violence because she considered it as a risk for being a widow that she had often witnessed happening to her mother.

“Throughout her life, mother was always treated unfairly. In the family, she did not receive inheritance rights just because of her status as a daughter. In society, she was always ostracized because she was considered a flirtatious widow and “unsellable” just because mother chose not to remarry. Mother was always patient and never cared about others.” (NM, 25)

Negative stigma toward widows is common in a patriarchal society. In other instances, women reported that being a widow is being “wrong”, all the right and good things they do are never seen and validated by the social environment. widows sometimes felt like they were “social jokes” or even “social trash” whose existence is rarely appreciated. This brought widows isolated and barely participating in the public domain, transporting them nowhere but to their homes.

Despite the challenges, widows in rural Indonesia showed powerful resilience in taking care of their families despite obstacles from various directions. This contrasts the study from (Sari & Wahyuliarmy, 2023), mentioning that there is a positive and incredibly significant relationship between social support and resilience in widows, indicating the higher the social support, the stronger the resilience, and the lower the social support, the weaker the resilience. The widows in this study did not receive much social support from their families, neighbors and the government officials, but they were able to survive amidst the negative talk, exclusion and discrimination they experienced. Moreover, in other rural areas in Indonesia under the study from Sabariman & Kholifah (2020) becoming a widow is a form of resilience for them to survive because they are used to being independent and do not want to remarry because of

the potential for failure or ending up adding to the economic burden and domestic violence. This follows the same consideration from these three widows who remain single.

Either here in my room, or Far Away in the Land of Strangers

All women attributed their current social and economic welfare to being unable to be actively and meaningfully involved in public settings. With the negative stigma and attitude from the neighborhood, the widow found little opportunity to do income generating. The isolation they felt trapped them into a deeper chain of poverty. As described by SK (45):

"Before working as a domestic helper, I was a traveling vegetable seller around village, at that time my husband was still alive (he did not work because he suffered an illness, so I was used to being the backbone of the family). However, after my husband died, and I became a widow, every time I sold vegetables, I always heard "sarcasm" about myself. At first, I didn't care, but I was only human, I was tired and chose not to sell to the same place. This affected my daily income, the money I got was less. At that time my youngest child also started to get sick, I was forced to stop selling. My savings were gone. No one in the family lent me money. I felt alone and had no money. When I started selling vegetables again, my customers had moved to other sellers. This encouraged me to go to Jakarta, I became a domestic helper there."

Another woman detailed feeling of frustration as she decided to go far away to be able to breathe in the fresh air free from negative stigma, as well as her only way to get money to support her child. NM (25) remarked that:

"I work as a waitress at a cafe near my house. I always choose the night shift (my working hours are from 7 am to 1 am), because it is easier to leave my child at bedtime (usually I ask my aunt to look after my child). Working at night for a widow is "suicide", I don't care. I can't work normally because there is no one to look after my child in day time. One day I had a fever, people accused me of having a sexually transmitted disease. It was 2019, and the Covid-19 storm had hit. I quit my job because my aunt forced me (she couldn't stand being mocked). 2 years of not working, I felt like I wanted to die, I relied on 50,000 from my aunt for 3-4 days, while my child had to drink milk and buy diapers. After the pandemic was over, I decided to move far away to different Island, to Lampung, leaving my child with my aunt. I have to earn a lot of money because my child will start school soon, and I can't do anything here."

Added by SJ (60) who considered farther place to make a living in a foreign country:

"I support my children by accepting orders for sewing clothes at home. My eldest son, who passed away, was already working at that time, and my daughter continued her education by going to college on the island of Java. That was when I decided to become a migrant worker in Saudi Arabia. I needed money for my child's college. Besides, I

didn't want to be alone at home, I was afraid of the neighbors, I felt safer going far away.”

The women in this study described a desire to be more involved in community activities. They claimed to be active in village women's organization activities before becoming widows. Being a widow burdened them with multiple responsibilities, they did not have time for that, and if they made the effort to participate, they often received discriminatory treatment. SJ (60) said that she was a teacher of children's religious studies (*guru ngaji*) and a coach for the village's youth volleyball team. When her husband died, she reduced her activities outside the home. She only had the activity of teaching religious studies which she did for one hour after Maghrib (the time when the sun is down around 6 PM) at her house. However, as time went by, her students decreased until there were no more students studying with her. Even though SJ taught voluntarily, without charge. She reported that her students' parents forbade them from studying at her house. This kind of story also resonated with SK (45) and ML (25), if not for working, they preferred to stay at home with their children. *“Society is not made for a widow, no place for us”* uttered ML (25) in her last statement about sharing her involvement in the public realm.

Each widow embarks a unique strategy for coping with economic deprivation. Though mostly the choice depends on women's preferences and their access to capital (Subair et al., 2023), they prefer comfort and opportunity. This could be seen by their choice in moving to other region when they found high distress of social stigma in their home, yet they also considered about the better opportunity regarding the money they will get for the shake of their children. When they migrate, they were not able to bring their children, and as happened to the two widows, they relied on relatives to take care of them. Ameyaw et al. (2020) named this situation as a social capital for widow as the form of social security given by the strong ties within the community

Navigating the Financial Scarcity and Patriarchal Adversity

Women who handle financial needs, child care, and house chores alone are vulnerable to poverty, particularly those who live in a rural community with bold patriarchal adversity, also limited access and resources to opportunity. SJ (60) narrated the dramatic change of her life after the departure of her husband. She struggled alone to ensure that their children could eat and go to school. A life endeavor that was previously shared with her husband, a story that previously felt tired but pleasurable, now becomes a multiple horror burden. She shared:

“Thank God, my late husband was a loving person to his family and a hard worker. We didn't have much money, but we lived comfortably. Therefore, when my husband died, my life changed drastically. I worked to earn money, took care of the children, and handled of the housework alone. The neighbors who were previously friendly, now had the opposite attitude. I often experienced hunger, didn't eat, and sold all the rice to buy my children's school uniforms. Even though I had an income as a tailor, it was still not enough.”

Moreover, SJ also expressed her misery for not receiving any government social cash transfer, particularly when the COVID-19 outbreak. Meanwhile, she witnessed that all her neighbors (whose financial condition was better than hers) received cash and rice assistance, especially those who were

widows like herself. Her daughter (who has graduated and is now a teacher at a local vocational school) had filed a protest with the village officials because in the online data there was her mother's name as a recipient of assistance. This incident ended in disappointment because the daughter received an explanation from the village government that her mother was considered unworthy of receiving social assistance because she was a "Rich Widow". SJ felt annoyed and angry with the statement from the village government

"I suddenly became a rich widow when the pandemic came, I just laughed sadly with my stomach empty, famished from food and justice."

SK (45) experienced something different about how she saw her life after her husband left her. She felt the same, in fact, she felt like a burden had been removed. Her husband had not worked for a long time and he was not the typical husband who was close to his wife and children. SK said that her husband often went into debt just to buy cigarettes. Prosperously, in the past 5 years, she has received PKH (Program Keluarga Harapan) assistance, a social assistance program from the government. This has helped her a lot in covering her daily needs. She receives rice and basic necessities every month and cash every three months, with an amount according to the number of dependent children, she received 600.000. She further explained:

"If I only rely on 600,000 per three months, it certainly won't be enough. I have to work. I may be evil, my husband died I feel a little relieved because no one is stealing the little aid money anymore. . . . Even so, I sometimes need a husband so that I am not underestimated by society. When I have a husband, I am never the subject of gossip. In the village, if there is gossip, it easily spreads, so I have difficulty getting a job as a daily maid in the village. I get paid 45,000 per day as a maid. But when there is no call for work, I don't get money. So, I hope people stop gossiping me. . (because my child is always sick, I stopped working in Jakarta, I went to my hometown and worked as a daily laundry and ironing maid in the neighbors' houses)."

In the middle of a society with patriarchal blossom strongly, as pictured by SJ and SK, the role of the husband becomes stability, be it economic stability or social stability. Therefore, for NM (25) who is very familiar with the absence of a father or husband, which is merely a ripple in the vast ocean of life? She never believed in a man in the first place. She uttered that her condition was simply the consequence of her choice and she must take responsibility as her mother did. She then narrated her story:

"I was raised by a mother, without a father. Although I witnessed how difficult it was for mothers to support their children alone, I always believed that women could eventually stand on their own two feet. Therefore, I never gave up on raising my child. I worked as hard as I could for my child, and I didn't care about "omongan" (what people said) about me. I am poor, my mother was poor, and my child should have a better fate than us. So, the most important thing now is to work, to ensure that my child can eat nutritious food and go to school."

NM added that she and her mother were the beneficiaries of PKH for two years during the period of COVID-19, and she showed gratitude for this program. She therefore recommended that the government should provide free counselling for widows, especially young widows. She remarked, *“We, widows, suffered a lot in society that will be great if the government not only supports us with cash assistance, but also free counselling. Our mental health matters”*. Regarding free counseling services, this experience was obtained by SK, who lives in Pemalang-Central Java. She elaborated that in 2023, she received business capital assistance from the Akar Cahaya Indonesia Foundation through the Kartini Corner program. She reported that this program also provides business consultations and free counseling services with professional psychiatrists held at the village hall. She further narrated:

“In mid-2023, I started selling vegetables again because I received business capital assistance from Kartini Corner. I was so happy! What made me most grateful was that I was able to consult a psychiatrist for almost 2 hours for free. This helped to release the "unek-unek" (stress) that had accumulated in my head.”

During the period of widowhood, despite their own efforts to struggle living and working, the two of them experienced getting government assistance. This can be the way to see how far the impact of the Beijing Declaration on rural widows in the form of providing social assistance for widows. Although not all widows experience it, social assistance in the form of cash through the PKH and basic food program, or BPNT (UN Women, 2024) has a real positive impact in overcoming short-term problems. The form of assistance with an empowerment approach, such as that received by a widow in Central Java from an NGO must be facilitated by the government. NGO and CSO (Civil Society Organization) based initiatives are always more effective in responding to community problems. Intervention from religious-based initiatives dominated the movement of women's empowerment in rural contexts in Indonesia (Farok, 2024; Rohinah & Anisah, 2020). Moreover, the report from (Ramdlaningrum et al., 2020) indicating CSO roles in women's economic empowerment by providing assistance for women in rural areas in the form of policy advocacy and youth employment, improving policies to support business and human rights particularly women's rights, direct assistance in facilitating access to cash and funds, improving the management of enterprise led by women, facilitating market access as part of the supply transformation, help in enhancing abilities such as technology use, business management, marketing, and financial management, and the last is enhancing the network with key government and private sector players. Apart from the limited government assistance, initiatives from outside the government whose mission is in line with the Beijing Declaration commitment are a hope for vulnerable and marginalized women in rural areas, such as widows.

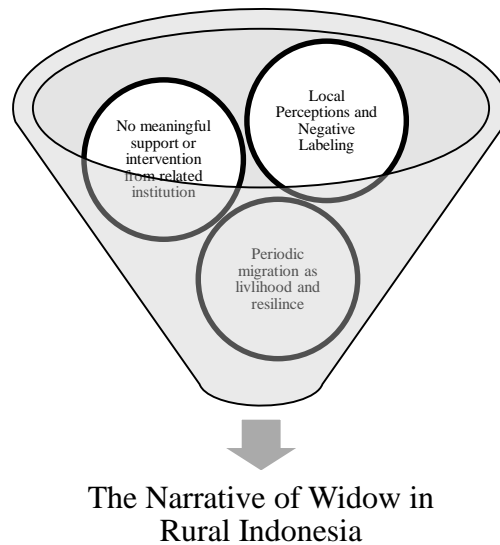


Figure 1: The lived experience of being a widow in rural Indonesia after the Beijing Declaration

The Beijing Declaration Reflection

Despite the existence of essential programs such as narrated in the Indonesian National Report, Beijing Platform for Action +30 (UN Women, 2024) mentioning the campaigns for awareness of gender equality and inclusivity in public space, it is regrettable that these initiatives remain “on paper”, failing to reach widows in rural areas who are in dire need of a safe place. The widows in the study perceive that societal attitudes toward them have remained unchanged over time, and government social assistance has had an insignificant impact on improving their lives. Therefore, among 10 priority issues from the National Commission on Violence against Women (*Komisi Nasional Anti Kekerasan Terhadap Perempuan*) (Komnas Perempuan, 2024) regarding the implementation of BPfA is (priority 1) ratification of the Draft Law on the Protection of Domestic Workers (RUU PPRT), (priority 4) ensure the implementation of reproductive health rights including for vulnerable groups and the right to legal abortion, (priority 6) fulfilment of access to health services including affordable mental health and free from discrimination and violence for women with mental disabilities, (priority 9) elimination of gender-based violence and fulfilment of women's basic rights in the context of migration, and (priority 10) elimination of gender-based discrimination and violence in the media environment. Although the priorities do not explicitly mention the rights of widows, the issues addressed within these priorities are closely aligned with and highly resonate with the needs of widows. The role of government, with its extensive resources and policymaking authority, is pivotal in having a meaningful impact on the lives of these marginalized women.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action commits to improving the lives of marginalized women, including widows in rural communities, by addressing economic, social and legal challenges. It focuses on the urgency of economic empowerment. This commitment manifests in the advocacy for

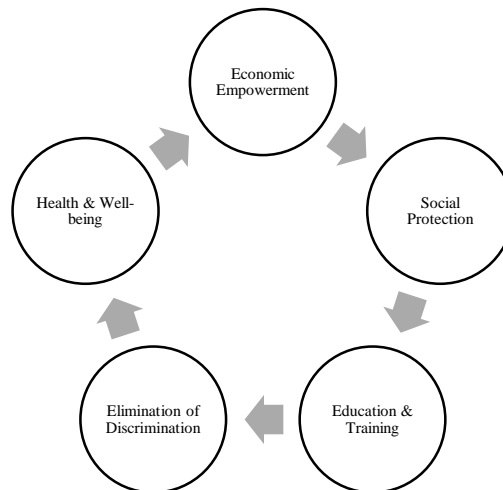


Figure 2: The Beijing Declaration Commitment to Reduce Inequality

equal access to resources, land ownership, and financial opportunities to enhance widow sufficiency. Additionally, it calls for social protection measures by ensuring widows receive legal rights, inheritance security, and access to social safety nets. The Beijing Declaration also emphasizes the importance of education and vocational training. This strengthens rural women with the skills necessary for economic independence. To address systemic barriers, the declaration calls for the elimination of discrimination, challenging cultural norms, and legal constraints that limit widows' participation in economic and social spheres. Moreover, it stresses the need for accessible healthcare, particularly reproductive health services, to support the overall well-being of women in marginalized rural communities. Through these commitments, the declaration seeks to promote gender equity and ensure that all women, regardless of their social or marital status, can lead dignified and empowered lives.

This study explores the lived experiences of widows in rural Indonesia using narrative inquiry and offers deep and personal insights into their realities. However, there are certain limitations. First, the findings of this research are context-specific since they reflect the experience of participants within a particular geographic and cultural setting. Second, subjectivity in narrative inquiry takes a role as the interpretation of stories follows the researchers' perspective. The last is sample size and selection bias may affect representativeness, possibly excluding more marginalized voices. Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable contributions to understanding widow living in rural Indonesia. The process of this research adhered to strict ethical guidelines to ensure the integrity and well-being of participants. Informed consent was gathered from all participants. Moreover, given the sensitive nature of personal narratives, confidentiality and anonymity were prioritized.

Conclusion

This paper explored the personal narrative of three widows in three different places in rural Indonesia, revealing their stories as they navigate social stigma, participate in the public domain, and strategies to cope with poverty. Using the narrative inquiry, this study exposed that while government and non-government program interventions have provided some assistance in meeting basic needs, significant challenges persist. Social stigma toward widows prevails to profoundly affect the widow's social and economic participation, also, there is a fundamental absence of long-term sustainable impactful

intervention. This highlighted that despite the efforts made since the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action whose mission is to promote women's rights and gender equality, meaningful support for widows in rural communities remains insufficient. The global commitment made 30 years ago failed to address the deep-seated societal attitudes that subsidize the marginalization of widows.

The finding finally led to several recommendations. First, this paper highlighted the need for further research into the personal experience of widows and other marginalized groups in rural communities employing diverse methodologies to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the social, economic, and cultural dimensions of widowhood. Second, the government and NGOs must collaborate to accelerate the Beijing Declaration and to implement community sensitization and awareness campaigns to combat social stigma and promote the inclusion of widows. The initiative that answers for a comprehensive and sustainable program that not only addresses immediate need but also foster a long-term socio-economic empowerment for widows. Last but not least, the policy makers need to integrate the specific needs of widows into broader poverty alleviation and gender equality strategies including ensuring widows with access to legal and social protection.

Acknowledgement

The authors express profound gratitude to *Lembaga Pengelola Dana Pendidikan (LPDP)* from the Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Indonesia for providing funding to support the researcher to present this paper at the 8th International Conference on Future of Women, and publish it at the conference proceedings.

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