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Widows and the termination of the gender contract

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Abstract

Widowhood is often described through stereotypes and images of passive, weak, lonely and dependent women. This study presents additional aspects of widows who have chosen to continue their lives without a new spouse. It thus joins the recently growing body of knowledge which presents widowhood in a less one-dimensional way while referring to the complexity and different layers of widows' lives. A qualitative study was conducted with 30 women aged 63–87 who had been widows for 1–34 years. The findings showed that the dominant experience shared by all women is one of liberation and freedom – a feeling of independence that is expressed socially, personally and economically. Thus, alongside feelings of loneliness and adaptation difficulties, they also experience strength and empowerment. The term 'gender contract' serves as a theoretical explanation of the independence narrative that characterises the widows; the termination of the couple's gender contract allows them to redefine their priorities, identify themselves as active instead of passive figures and create for themselves a place of their own. By bringing widowhood to the centre of the discussion, the study gives legitimacy to a discourse on feelings less spoken about, such as relief, freedom and independence. In this way, the study contributes to the ongoing debate on widows by shattering the accepted myth of widows as vulnerable, weak and dependent but without underestimating the difficulties or ignoring the women's diversity.

Keywords: widows; widowhood in old age; independence; resilience; gender contract

Introduction

The death of a spouse is considered a stressful event with negative consequences for the surviving spouse. Data from Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics for 2020 show that the population of senior citizens aged 65 and over in Israel stands at 1.128 million people, of whom 23 per cent are widowed (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2020). Among men, 77 per cent are married and 9 per cent are widowers; among women, 47 per cent are married and 35 per cent are widows. The percentage of women in Israel's older population is higher than the percentage of men and their life expectancy is longer. Therefore, women's share in this population group increases with

age, and widowhood can be viewed as predominantly a female phenomenon. In addition, women usually marry older men, and therefore the phenomenon of widowhood is more common among women than men and their widowhood status lasts longer.

Widowhood in old age is presented in the literature as a 'homogeneous problem', characterised by sadness, depression and decreased function, with many studies focusing on the widow's experience of loss and loneliness after a husband's death (Bonanno *et al.*, 2002; Chambers, 2002; Wilcox *et al.*, 2003; Carr, 2004a; Janke *et al.*, 2008; Høy and Hall, 2020). The stereotypical widow is characterised by vulnerability, weakness and dependency. This image produces social expectations regarding how widows should dress, behave, spend time, mourn, feel and more (Hahn *et al.*, 2011), which may explain why the literature has emphasised their weakness, vulnerability and coping difficulties. Many studies have relied on an early assumption based on the traditional division of gender roles that widows suffer from adjustment problems due to their economic dependency (Bonanno *et al.*, 2002; Utz *et al.*, 2004; Carr and Boerner, 2013).

A few studies, however, have focused on other aspects of widowhood and referred to widows as strong, resilient women with good adaptability. These studies have found that many widows report a sense of empowerment and an ability to recover and adapt well to their new condition (Hahn *et al.*, 2011; Holm and Severinsson, 2012; Collins, 2014; Høy and Hall, 2020). These studies do not ignore the difficulties of widowhood but emphasise aspects such as resilience, independence and sometimes even a sense of release, especially when it is preceded by a long period of caring for a sick spouse (Klaus, 2021). It has also been found that psychological resilience, which generally contributes to satisfaction and wellbeing, helps women to adapt to their widowhood more than other sociodemographic variables (O'Rourke, 2004).

The aim of the current study was to understand how older widows experience their widowhood and how they perceive and construct themselves as widows in contrast to accepted stereotypes, perceptions and social expectations of older widows. It joins previous literature that stressed the importance of highlighting other aspects of widows' lives and gave legitimacy to a discourse on feelings less spoken about in the context of widowhood, such as relief, freedom and independence, without underestimating the difficulties, loneliness and sadness. The study uses the concept of a 'gender contract' and a combination of gerontology and feminism theories to contribute to our understanding of the complex phenomenon of widowhood and its multi-dimensionality by presenting additional aspects of widows' lives. By doing so, it joins the recent scholarship that has begun to fill the lacuna in these bodies of knowledge by placing older widows front and centre. This is especially interesting in the Israeli context as Israel is a familistic society in which heteronormative familial roles are central to individual identity. Widows who choose to continue their lives without a partner challenge these family norms and traditional perceptions and social expectations of the role of the older widow.

Widows' attitudes towards new relationships

In contrast to a marital relationship motivated mainly by the wish to have a family, the motivation to have a partner later in life is, primarily, a need for companionship

(Davidson, 2002; Koren, 2022). Many widowers and some widows do indeed remarry, while others prefer not to. Studies have found gender to play a significant role in the way women and men experience widowhood and their desire for a new relationship (Davidson, 2002; Panchadhyayi, 2021). While most women are not interested in a binding relationship or remarrying, men seek a romantic relationship and are interested in remarrying a relatively short time after their spouse's death (Van Den Hoonaard, 2002; Carr and Boerner, 2013; Koren, 2022).

Common explanations for why women are not interested in new relationships are mostly demographic and cultural. Demographically, women tend to live longer than men; as they get older, the relative number of women increases, leaving more women than men. Culturally, patriarchal arrangements in gender relations have established a norm according to which most men, of all ages, marry women younger than them. Thus, as men get older, the pool of potential single women for a new relationship increases, while for women the pool of single older men decreases with age (Koren, 2022).

Van Den Hoonaard (2002) argued that widows are not interested in caring for and nursing a sick spouse. In addition, many women feel that during their years of marriage they had to compromise and organise their lives according to their husband's schedule. Their relationship was characterised by a traditional division of gender roles, according to which they were responsible for care of the household, children and husband. Women who were born in the first decades of the 20th century experienced a process of socialisation based on a patriarchal family model, according to which it is customary to respect the will of men. On becoming widows, these women experience a sense of freedom and are not interested in returning to a relationship based on the same gendered roles with a new spouse. They are afraid of losing their independence and caring for an older, sick and dependent spouse (Davidson, 2002; Watson and Stelle, 2011; Carr and Boerner, 2013). Another study of older widows found that women who had been highly emotionally dependent on their partner and had low self-esteem experienced change and personal growth following widowhood; their self-esteem improved, and therefore they had no desire to enter into a new relationship (Carr, 2004b).

Nonetheless, there are widows who, while disinterested in remarrying, want to be in a relationship with a man, not necessarily an intimate and sexual relationship but simply someone to go out with. They enjoy the companionship but do not see this as leading to a permanent relationship or marriage. As Davidson (2002: 51) explained, 'some widows want someone to go out with and not someone to come home to'. While it is socially acceptable for men to have a non-binding, sexual relationship, women are expected to justify being in a non-binding relationship with a man without the intention of remarrying (Davidson, 2002).

Following the feminist discourse, women nowadays are more aware of their sexuality beyond the role of bearing children. It is more acceptable for older widows to enjoy their sexuality and to have an active sex life without a binding relationship, despite ageist stereotypes that only young people feel sexuality and sexual attraction (Kasif and Band-Winterstein, 2017). This ageist approach ignores the sexual needs of older widowed women, thus sending confusing and contradictory messages: liberal attitudes and openness, on the one hand, and ageist double standards, on the other (Kasif and Band-Winterstein, 2017).

Many older widows prefer the company of other women; indeed, women have far more friendships with other women than men have with other men (Van Den Hoonaard, 2002; Wilcox *et al.*, 2003; Janke *et al.*, 2008). Social connections have been found to relieve loneliness, reduce stress, provide a sense of belonging and contribute to life satisfaction, and thus to serve as a valuable resource in maintaining mental and physical wellbeing (Janke *et al.*, 2008; Nieboer and Cramm, 2018; Panchadhyayi, 2021).

Widowhood presents women with many challenges. Maintaining good health and wellbeing and managing to build a new life as an individual require a high level of functioning and the ability to develop social relationships and an active daily routine. It has been found that many women have close family and social ties that help them adapt to their new situation as widows despite the challenges. In her study dealing with the contribution of social and family ties, especially during the holidays and Christmas, Collins (2014) found that the continuity of family norms and tradition and the preservation of intergenerational ties help widows to adjust and cope with the transition to widowhood and give them a sense of stability. Internal resources, such as a sense of control, self-confidence and independence, are also important for helping them cope with widowhood (Høy and Hall, 2020).

Termination of the 'gender contract' from a feminist gerontological perspective

The gender contract, as defined by Sa'ar (2009, 2016), is a cultural scenario that dictates certain appropriate gendered behaviour patterns as well as the rights and obligations of men's and women's social roles. It shapes the balance of power and access to resources and maintains a particular social order, including the division of roles within the marriage system, according to which women are defined as primary care-givers in the family (Gibson *et al.*, 2018).

For most women born in the 1940s and 1950s, the gender contract reflected a patriarchal conception of the division of roles: women were responsible for the household and caring for family members, while men were expected to provide financially for the family. In the process of socialisation, women internalised these gendered expectations and their role as care-givers (Gibson *et al.*, 2018). With the death of the husband, the gender contract comes to an end, but due to their socialisation, women sometimes feel guilty about enjoying a new sense of freedom (Davidson, 2001).

The termination of the gender contract following widowhood can be mistakenly seen as the termination of sexuality. In the context of widows, the issue of sexuality is often silenced and characterised by feelings of shame, embarrassment and secrecy. However, widowed women do not necessarily stop feeling sexual. According to the patriarchal family pattern, women were required to be completely loyal to their husbands, both living and dead. As a result, there are widows who feel that they have no legitimacy to enjoy sex or feel sexual (Kasif and Band-Winterstein, 2017) – an attitude which has forced women to deny their sexuality and perceive it as illegitimate and inappropriate. With the addition of ageist attitudes which cause older people to be perceived as not sexual, the common assumption is that older widows do not enjoy sex at this stage of their lives.

The choice of life without a partner after widowhood and the end of the gender contract can be examined through a combination of gerontology and feminism. Feminist gerontology has emerged in response to two problems: first, feminist research did not specifically focus on older women and suffered from age blindness; and second, gerontological studies, while addressing issues typical of older women and gender differences, lacked a feminist perspective; focusing on women does not in itself make a study feminist. Feminist gerontology emphasises how age and gender together shape experiences in old age (Calasanti, 2004). Accordingly, older women are in a state of double marginality as women and as old people, with widows in an especially vulnerable position (Freixas *et al.*, 2012; Holstein, 2015). Beyond gender differences, feminist gerontological research suggests seeing older women as a heterogeneous population with large variability in the ways they adapt to widowhood (Hooyma *et al.*, 2002; Thomeer, 2014).

Many studies, some of which are mentioned above, see widows as a homogeneous group. However, without ignoring the difficulties that older widows face, new studies have found that, while not the general case, some women get stronger as they grow older, showing resilience and adaptability to the changes that accompany old age and widowhood better than men (Koren, 2016). Resilience and mental strength are related to external resources, such as family and social support and economic status, and internal resources, such as self-image and adaptability to unexpected, temporary or permanent changes (Gulbrandsen and Walsh, 2015). Some widows adapt to the loss of a spouse better than men thanks to skills they have acquired and learned in earlier stages of their lives (Collins, 2014; Gulbrandsen and Walsh, 2015). Thus, with age, there is sometimes a reversal in the gender power relationship: women feel empowered and become more active, while men become more passive and dependent (Bonanno *et al.*, 2002; Koren, 2016; Manor, 2019); women become active, resilient and independent, while men become more vulnerable and experience difficulty adjusting to widowhood (Lieblich, 2014; Koren, 2016).

The reversal of gender roles has economic aspects as well. Widows have been found more economically vulnerable than widowers due to the fact that many women of earlier generations did not work during their years of marriage or, if they did work, tended to earn less than their spouses, leaving them financially dependent on their husbands. However, studies have shown that some widows experience economic independence, sometimes for the first time in their lives (Davidson, 2001). Similarly, Bennett *et al.* (2010) found that there are women who became financially independent after widowhood, despite marital relationships characterised by a traditional division of gender roles.

Methodology

Data collection and the study sample

In order to understand the subjective meaning of life as a widow, this study was conducted using a qualitative method and an interpretive phenomenological approach which seeks to understand the essence of the experience as perceived by the person themselves (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008; Creswell, 2012).

The study was conducted in Israel among a sample of 30 widows within an age range of 63–87 who had been widows for 1–34 years. Most of them lived in their own homes, with two living in an assisted living facility.

Of the 30 women, eight had been widowed for over 20 years, 12 were widowed between 10 and 20 years ago, and ten were widowed between 1 and 10 years ago (two for about a year). At the time of the interviews, two women were in romantic relationships but without co-habitation; ten had experienced romantic relationships with one or more partners over the years but without co-habiting or remarrying; and 18 had not been in a romantic relationship since being widowed.

The women's economic status was determined according to self-report and subjective feelings in answer to the question of how they rated themselves economically. They rated themselves as follows: five women rated themselves in a medium-high status; five in a low status; and 20 women in a medium status.

Interviewees were first located through direct contact with the directors of an adult day care centre who referred a number of women who expressed willingness to be interviewed. The 'snowball' method was then used, with interviewees referring to other women who were willing to be interviewed.

The data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews that allowed for a combination of pre-prepared questions alongside the flexibility and freedom to develop a dialogue and raise additional questions, according to the interviewee's level of openness. At times, the conversation turned to topics that were not included in the prepared interview guide, but this allowed the interviewee to raise issues that were significant for her and to enrich the interview with her personal experiences. Most of the interviews took place in the interviewees' homes, except for two that were conducted over the phone due to COVID-19 restrictions. Each interview lasted about an hour and a half. At the beginning of each interview, the subject and purpose of the research was explained to the interviewee. It was explained that the information collected was for research purposes only and would not be used for any other purpose. All interviewees gave their verbal consent for the interview to be recorded. They were told that they could, at any moment, stop the interview if they changed their mind and not participate in the research. Interviewees were asked general questions about their lives before they were widowed, whether the death of the spouse was sudden or expected, and whether it was due to a long illness. They were also asked about the difficulties they experienced as widows and whether they were in or interested in a new relationship. Questions were also asked about leisure activities, social networks and widows' support groups, and about family relationships with children, grandchildren and others.

All the interviews were recorded with the interviewees' consent and transcribed. The interviewees were promised strict anonymity and privacy; thus, the names used throughout are pseudonyms. The interviews were originally conducted in Hebrew and then translated into English by the author. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Western Galilee College.

Analysis

Analysis of the findings in phenomenological studies involves arranging and structuring the entire body of knowledge collected and then decomposing the data into segments and pieces of information and rearranging them in order to ascertain

their meaning (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994; Creswell, 2012). In line with this approach and as suggested by Giorgi (1997), the analysis of the interviews was performed in a number of stages. First, after the interviews had been transcribed and the recordings listened to several times, each interview was read separately with the aim of identifying initial categories. In the second stage, each interview was analysed and divided into units of meaning for the purpose of creating information groups that appear to belong to the same phenomenon in order to identify important themes and subthemes. In the third stage, a comparative analysis was conducted by means of a lateral reading of all the interviews according to the division into the categories assembled earlier. In this way, broader super-categories were constructed, *i.e.* central themes.

Findings

The women differ from each other in terms of the length of time since becoming widows or the circumstances of the widowhood. Also, as mentioned above, some had been involved in romantic relationships since becoming widows, while others had not. However, despite their differences, the choice to live without a partner and without a binding relationship was clearly stated in all the interviews. Feelings of autonomy and control over life were the thread connecting all the interviews. Thus, the central and most dominant theme expresses the desire for independence in various aspects of life. The additional several subthemes derived from this central theme and express different aspects of independence and reasons for the choice to live without a partner which allows them not to compromise, not to take care of someone else who depends on them and not to commit to anyone. An additional two themes express other aspects that emerged in the interviews: the women's attitudes towards sexuality and the ageing body, and the women's feelings of loneliness.

'No need to get permission from anyone, now I am independent': the perception of spouses as restrictive and controlling

During the interviews, the interviewees were asked to describe a dominant feeling or experience that characterises their lives as widows. Surprisingly, alongside feelings of loneliness, almost all spoke of a sense of independence and liberation, using words like 'freedom', 'release' and 'comfort'. Marianne said: 'There are advantages to being a widow: you decide alone, you do what you want, you don't have to consider anyone.' This sentiment was shared by Jennifer:

If I were with someone now, it would be hard to leave him alone at home when I go out; that's how I am completely independent. I do what I want, I have no commitment to anyone. So now I am alone and I am free, independence is a good thing. I can go alone to the theatre or to a concert, and I have no problem. I need my independence.

Most of the interviewees had worked and made a living when their husbands were alive. Nonetheless, they still described a patriarchal relationship in which their husbands had authority over all financial matters, and they had to ask for his approval

when spending money. After their deaths, the women experienced a sense of economic freedom and liberation. As Maya said:

No need to get permission from anyone. I live freely. I go and buy myself what I want. I decide alone and don't have to convince anyone else. Me, myself, without thinking, without having to consult anyone.

Widowhood is thus shown to present new challenges for women as they discover abilities they did not know they had. Their ability to succeed in various challenges gives them a sense of power and control over their lives. Alice explained it thus:

I'm renovating the house, and it's very difficult. Once, I didn't know how to deal with these financial matters and with contractors ... and here you see me in the middle of the renovations and, apart from a little help from my brother, I am doing everything alone. Suddenly I've discovered I can do everything alone. So yes, it's a little difficult, but I can do it, and I feel strong. I feel a different person than I was. A good friend told me that if my husband were looking down on me from heaven, he'd probably be saying that he doesn't know me and would never have imagined what has become of me ... going out to pubs alone. I do everything by myself.

The word 'alone' was repeated many times in all the interviews. In the previous quotes, it is notable that both Jennifer and Alice repeated the word three times. However, 'alone' as said here does not express loneliness and does not have a negative meaning but rather a positive one. Being alone the widows feel strength and liberation, as Jennifer said, 'alone and free'.

'Can't leave him alone': the perception of spouses as dependent

When discussing her willingness to embark on a new marriage, Rebecca said:

How could I leave him alone at home when I go out with my friends? I couldn't leave him alone at home and go and play bridge with my friends.

This sentiment was repeated in many of the interviews when talking about new partners or husbands. Statements like, 'Why do I need someone to take care of? I don't want to cook for anyone or wash for anyone. I don't want to take care of anyone else', as Sarah said, reveal a perception of men as dependent and unable to take care of themselves. Such statements embody two opposing worldviews. The first constructs men as passive and requiring daily care in contrast to women who are seen as capable of taking care of themselves. The second places women in their traditional gender role in the home, caring for family members. The only way for them to oppose this traditional gender role and not bear the burden of a care-giver is to avoid embarking on a new marital relationship. The interviewees showed that, once widowed, they were no longer interested in taking on that role, even at the risk of not having help and care for themselves. As Maya said: 'I don't want a new relationship. This is good for me, and I am comfortable

like this, without having someone to take care of.’ Regarding a man she had met recently, Rebecca said similarly: ‘It’s very convenient for me. He comes round to me at eight o’clock, after he has already eaten dinner on his own. That way I don’t have to cook for him.’

These findings about women’s gendered care-giving role are consistent with the data that nursing homes have an overwhelming majority of women residents. This is not just the result of demographics and the longer life expectancy of women. Researchers have found that this is related to the fact that in crisis situations, such as illness or disability, the normative expectation is that the woman will take on the role of the care-giver and nurse the man; however, when women need support, men are unwilling or unable to become care-givers, and women therefore often move to an external institution (Koren, 2016).

Moreover, when the widows compared themselves to married women of their generation, they often expressed feeling lucky for having ended their role as care-givers. They even felt sorry for those who are still married and have to take care of an old and dependent spouse. As Jennifer said:

The man becomes a burden on the woman ... an unequivocal burden. I see such couples who are still married, and the woman is ready to say goodbye to him. There are many such cases.

Marriage through the gender lens is therefore seen as a burden and an unbalanced relationship since the man is regarded as dependent and in need of care. Jennifer, like other widows who have ended the gendered division of roles, would rather be without a partner than in a relationship which forces her to assume the role of care-giver again.

‘Absolutely no co-habitation’: men want commitment, women do not

A common stereotype about young people is that men prefer to be free, unrestricted and not committed, while women prefer to commit, to institutionalise their relationship and have a permanent partner. However, a different picture emerged from the interviewees, demonstrating that there is a change in old age. Accordingly, older men are looking for a binding relationship, co-habitation and marriage, while older women are jealous of their new freedom, private space and independence. As Jennifer recounted: ‘After I was widowed, I had a very nice boyfriend and he wanted to get married. But I didn’t want to, so we broke up.’

From the discourse with the widows, their need to construct themselves as independent and to produce gender distinctions between their needs and men’s needs was most evident. In Nancy’s words:

Men want it in a completely different way. Men want a home, and I wanted my peace and my privacy. When I moved here, I wouldn’t let him move into the new house with me, so we broke up. He wanted everything, including living together, and I don’t. I want a partner I can go out with and even to love, but I don’t want to live with him.

Nancy perceives a binding relationship as a noise and a disturbance in contrast to the quiet life she has built for herself. The silence that Nancy is talking about is not a forced silence but a desired silence that stems from a need for her own place. Therefore, many widows expressed a preference for a friend to go out with but not to come home with so that their personal space remains their own.

Sylvia even used the word 'oppressive' when speaking about the possibility of being in a committed relationship. She continued:

I don't want to get into a commitment. I have no problem with a fun relationship – going on all kinds of trips and outings – but no commitment. I don't want to take care of someone. It doesn't suit me ... I have no problem with 'you will be there and I will be here', just don't bother me and I won't bother you. We can travel, drink coffee and watch a movie, but absolutely no co-habitation. I don't want a relationship that will bother me. I am ready for a relationship that will leave me time for myself and a place for myself; that is the most important thing for me.

Alice also talked about the need for her own place where she can enjoy her freedom. She expressed fears that a new relationship would infringe on her freedom:

I want a relationship without living together. It's nice to live alone. Now I understand that. I met someone nice, but he wanted to get married and I don't want to get married, it seems unnecessary to me. I prefer to live alone. I have freedom, and when I'm in a committed relationship, it takes me over and takes away my freedom.

The role that the interviewees assigned to a new partner is only as a companion, as someone to go out with, but not as a life partner. Rebecca explained:

It's easier and more comfortable to go out with a man. You feel confident, you feel a sense of belonging, you feel good. And he's such a gentleman, he holds my hand. But each of us lives in their own house ... because sometimes I want to meet up with friends and not be with him all the time.

The refusal to co-habit is related, among other things, to other members of the extended family, especially adult children, which may create additional complexity. Although all 12 interviewees who were involved in romantic relationships (in the past or at present) said that their children supported them, the shared family meetings were nevertheless characterised by a tense atmosphere, as described by Nancy:

In all the relationships I've had, my children have never been a problem. Definitely not. They always respected my choice. Maybe they had criticism, but they never caused me scandals and upset. I think they were happy to have someone looking after their mother. But you see, it didn't work. There is always a tension. Although they didn't make dramas, and if I came with a partner they would receive him very nicely and talk to him, and my partner's daughters also received me very nicely. But still, there was always some tension in the air.

Jennifer, who resisted establishing a romantic relationship for many years after being widowed, distinguished between her relationship with her husband before he died, which was characterised by full sharing of every aspect of life, and the subsequent relationships, which had a lower degree of sharing. When each side has their own property, their own family and children, it is better, in her opinion, to maintain clear boundaries without full sharing and thus preserve for oneself a large degree of autonomy and independence:

Chapter 2 [meaning post-widowhood relationship] is different; Chapter 2 is not Chapter 1. From an economic point of view as well. In Chapter 2, everyone keeps their own things, remains autonomous and protects their things. Even if there is great love, in Chapter 2 there is no totality. In Chapter 1 there is totality; in Chapter 2 there is none. Because there is a conflict of interest. Each side has their own children, and everything is completely different.

Although all 12 widows testified to their own children treating their new partner with respect, the partner's children did not always accept them in a similar way. For example, Rebecca described an unpleasant experience when her partner's daughters asked her to sign a financial agreement affirming that she would have no rights in the event of their separation or his death:

We started going to the movies; once we even went to a hotel for the weekend and it was very nice. Until his daughters started interfering and worrying, and they managed to get me to sign some kind of contract that I wouldn't take anything from him. It was a terrible insult to me. I was terribly offended. This was a trigger to end the relationship. Then I heard that he became a full invalid. I was saved.

In short, the widows interviewed all expressed enjoying their independence and feeling no need for a new spouse. As Jennifer said:

I really liked men, but now I no longer need them. I now explicitly do not want to live with a man. It's nice to have a friend to go out with, but it can be a woman as well as a man ... An intimate relationship is very nice but not to run a joint household. I wouldn't give up my independence now. I'm more comfortable like this.

The narrative that thus appears to dominate the discourse is the widows' need for autonomy, personal space and control over their life. They have learned to enjoy their new status which allows them to choose whether to be in a relationship or not, and if they do choose to be in a relationship, it is one that is not binding and does not intrude on their personal space too much.

'The ageing body is not aesthetically pleasing': sexuality in old age

During the interviews, the women were asked whether they would like to have a new partner. They were not asked at any stage in the interview questions about sexuality, their body or sexual activity. Nonetheless, about half of the interviewees raised the issue themselves, speaking very freely about sexuality, sex in old age and their relationship to the ageing body. Two opposing perceptions of the body and

sexuality emerged from these interviews: the first rejects any relationship that implies sexuality or intimacy beyond embracing friends and holding hands; and the second sees sexuality and sexual relationships as part of the whole of a new relationship.

Rebecca, for example, expressed no interest in a relationship with a sexual character. She used the phrasing 'guarding my dignity' when describing a new relationship she was in:

He doesn't try to mess with me. He respects my dignity. It doesn't interest me either. We enjoy being together, and he doesn't try to touch me. The togetherness is important. One must remember that the body of older people is not aesthetic, and I no longer have to tolerate these unaesthetic things.

Rebecca thus saw an advantage in the fact that her new partner does not touch her. Some of the interviewees who expressed no interest in a sexual relationship explained this through the gender differences between men and women. Daniela said: 'A man is looking for a full relationship also sexually. And a woman knows how to do it alone. We don't need men for that.'

Nancy, on the other hand, would rather have a relationship that includes sex but had not, so far, found anyone attractive enough. She talked about one man she had found attractive, but he suffered from sexual dysfunctionality which caused further complications in the relationship:

A friend introduced me to someone. I decided to give him a chance, but when he came over, I didn't like him. When you are not attracted to a person, it's a problem. That's how it was with the previous guy I went out with. He put his hands on my breast, and it was really hard for me because I wasn't attracted to him. He would come to dinner, and then he would start looking for my tits, kissing me, but I just wasn't attracted to him. Before that I knew someone else, who was very clever and nice, but sometimes, I'm sorry to say, men don't have an erection. It's terribly complicated. So, we went to a sex therapist together. I agreed to go because he said that if he can't have an erection, then I'd have to find another way, and I had a hard time with it. At 75, I won't be going down on him. He wouldn't take pills.

The interviewees' different perceptions of sexuality were also expressed in their attitudes towards the ageing body, both female and male. Some women are ashamed of their bodies and perceive the old body as unaesthetic and unpleasant to look at, as Rebecca said. Others, however, accept their body as it is, enjoy their sexuality and feel attractive, not necessarily in the context of sexual activity. Alice, for example, who feels good with her body, said:

Some women say they don't want to undress in front of a man. We are no longer at our best. But I know I am not dating a 20-year-old guy; I'm dating a guy more or less my age, so he's not at his best either. I don't feel bad about my body. I'm not thin, but neither is he.

Nancy also expressed feeling good about her body and accepting it as it is. Yet she feels that men have different expectations of how she should look:

I don't have the same shape as when I was 18. I'm now 75 and it's not the same, but men have fantasies. The last guy told me, 'You have a belly.' I have a belly because I am not a 20-year-old girl.

Francis recounted a conversation with her friends while they were on vacation:

We were on vacation at the Dead Sea and looked at the men and asked each other: 'Who would you like to be with here? Who would you go with?' And we all answered: 'None of them. They all look awful.'

Francis's words can be interpreted as ridicule, contempt and mockery of the ageing male body, exposed in its nakedness. However, they also betray the widows' sense of shame in relation to their own bodies. Their talk about the changes taking place in the ageing body, both male and female, demonstrates their concern with the body's external appearance and level of functioning. The body – either as a source of disgust and shame or as a source of desire and physical attraction – is therefore present in the discourse as significant and central in every interaction.

'I'm not alone, but I feel lonely': not everything is good in widowhood

While the dominant narrative revealed in the interviews was one of independence and self-confidence, the picture is not complete without addressing the other feelings that emerged, namely of difficulty, loneliness and anxiety. All the women interviewed expressed a range of emotions, even those who have rebuilt their lives, are surrounded by friends and family, are engaged in various leisure activities, and have lives full of content and meaning, experience loneliness and sadness. Judy put it this way:

I have a lot of friends and I'm very busy. I'm not socially lonely. But I feel lonely. It's not the same thing. I'm very independent, I go to a lot of events alone, but I still haven't overcome the difficulty of absorbing compassionate looks. A friend told me that bereavement is like an invisible disability. This is true. I have this feeling of disability.

Judy uses the word 'disability' when describing her condition as a widow, as if some organ in the body is missing and she needs to learn to adapt to living without it. The reason for this can be heard in Marian's words:

Society is basically made up of couples. And that's the hardest thing. Because in society everyone is a couple and only you are alone, without a partner.

Indeed, the literature distinguishes between 'loneliness', which is a subjective state related to a person feeling lonely even when in a crowded environment, and 'being alone', which is an objective, given state (Shiovitz-Ezra, 2011). The feeling of loneliness felt by the interviewees illustrates this well. Their lives may be full of activity

and friendships, but still sometimes they feel lonely when they have no one with whom to share their day-to-day experiences. Sandy also echoed this sentiment:

Loneliness, it's the hardest. I'm alone. I try to keep myself busy, I volunteer at school and I go to the theatre. I sing in a choir and I'm busy, but there's a lot of loneliness. And that's hard.

Jennifer said similar things:

I play bridge and I play on the computer. I play chamber music on the violin. I read, I watch TV, and yet there are certainly moments of loneliness. I think the hardest time is the weekends or holidays, but even then, I try to fill my time.

For Nancy too, weekends are the most difficult times:

I have no widowed or divorced friends, all my good friends are married, and then it's problematic because on Fridays and Saturdays they are busy with their families. I have learned not to be offended or take it to heart, but I'd be lying if I said I don't feel neglected sometimes. I was sick for two weeks and I was completely alone. There were days when I felt really bad, and these are the moments that are most difficult for me, this fear that something will happen to me when I am alone at home. That's my anxiety.

Despite the feeling of loneliness, the widows showed no interest in binding marital relationships and co-habitation, as mentioned above. They have built a full life for themselves and learned to see its benefits. Marian stated:

I have never felt miserable. I do many other things. When you get used to living alone, it's hard to bring someone into life. And it has benefits. After you settle in, you adapt to your new status as a widow, you get along and no longer want anyone in your life. I won't say it's fun to be a widow, but you've built a life on your own.

Overall, the findings showed that widows experience their widowhood in various different ways. Some women are more active and some less so, some are interested in a romantic relationship, and some are not. But describing widowhood only in dark colours as sad, lonely and painful does not reflect the reality that emerged from the interviews. The majority of the widows in the current study were independent women who chose to emphasise their independence without ignoring the feelings of longing and loneliness. As Alice said:

When you overcome grief, you learn to see yourself in a new way. You find good things, you keep living, you have to see the good things too.

Discussion

The findings emerging from the interviews with the widows who are living alone at home or in an assisted living facility reveal a complex reality that does not necessarily conform to the usual stereotypes and social expectations of widowhood. The

discourse presents their choice of an independent and active life and refusal to accept the social images of widows as weak, sad and lonely. While they do experience loneliness at various levels, they vehemently oppose returning to living according to the gender contract they know from their past. None of the women are interested in remarrying or living in binding relationships, each for her own reasons. Some said they would never find a partner as suitable as their previous husband, who was usually described in ideal terms. Although the interviewees were not asked specific questions about the quality of their marriage before becoming widows, half of them reported having a good and satisfying married life. Five women said that their husband was their first love; some spoke of a deep friendship and, while acknowledging that the relationship was not perfect, they do not believe that they would be able to experience a relationship as good and thus saw no point in looking for a new relationship and being disappointed. Others feared experiencing another separation and being widowed again.

Another reason for the decision not to remarry stems from the fact that in a relatively short period of time all of the women managed to build a new and stable routine for themselves, filled with various occupations that fill their time with content and interest, and have no desire to introduce a new partner into this routine. They did, however, report the absence of a husband being particularly noticeable at the weekends when they feel lonely in contrast to weekdays when they are often busy with various activities and surrounded by friends and family members. Carr (2004a, 2004b) also referred to the influence of social support on the decision to remarry. For example, widowers with relatively low social support expressed more interest and desire in remarrying than those with more social support. Whatever the reason, all the women in the current study declared no interest in adopting the role of the 'care-giver' and embarking on a restrictive relationship; they all refuse to enter into another gender contract.

Indeed, the difficulty of taking on the role of care-giver came up in all of the interviews. Both women who took care of sick husbands for a long time and those who were suddenly widowed (due to a car accident or heart attack), all spoke of the need to be released from the role of care-giver. No connection was found between the length of time spent caring for a sick husband or the circumstances of the death and the widow's decision not to remarry. This claim is consistent with the findings of Carr *et al.* (2001) about the complexity of the relationship between a sudden or predictable death and the degree of adaptation and grief processing. Furthermore, it is possible that the prolonged and dedicated treatment in the period preceding the husband's death actually contributed to a great closeness which helped to bring closure and thus also better adjustment (Carr, 2003).

The findings of the current study indicate that the role of the care-giver, as perceived by the women interviewed, is not related to their husband's health condition. According to their worldview, which conforms with the conventional gender division of roles, their main role is taking care of the household and family members. Widowhood thus frees them from the need to take care of their husband, healthy or sick. In this context, widowhood is experienced in a similar way to retirement from work, as discussed by author (Manor, 2019), who found that retired women want time for themselves and to start a new chapter in life in which the role of taking care of others is replaced by taking care of themselves.

The choice to live without a spouse reflects the widows' desire for their own private space – a space where they are free to make decisions independently without having to compromise. They want to be for themselves, after a long period of devoting themselves to the role of caring for their husbands. The term 'caring for a spouse' was used to relate not only to nursing care but also to general daily routine of attending to the needs of their husbands. Despite this choice, some of the widows did not give up their right to feel sexual and have relationships that include sexual aspects but without the commitment of the gender contract.

The current study thus portrays a different picture from previous studies, *e.g.* Janke *et al.* (2008) and Wilcox *et al.* (2003), who presented widows as poor, passive, weak and dependent. Instead, it corresponds with the works of *e.g.* Van Den Hoonaard (2002) and Davidson (2002), who demonstrated the ability of widows to manage their lives independently, and Collins (2014), who revealed the resilience and strength of widows and their growth in later life even at times with the potential to be especially difficult, such as family holidays and Christmas.

The interviewees' experience of freedom and independence was found to overshadow their experience of loneliness. When their widowhood had been preceded by a long period of caring for a sick spouse, the sense of release and relief was even stronger. The discourse, which describes men as dependent as children and in need of care and supervision, reflects how the widows construct themselves as strong and independent. They guard their private space, choose whether to go on dates or not, and determine the conditions and the frequency. In this way they establish their identity as independent, autonomous and active subjects, and not as victims of social expectations or norms. They control their lives and do not want to bring someone in who might endanger their feeling of freedom or jeopardise it. The women's refusal to enter a binding relationship with a new spouse and take on the role of care-giver challenges the institution of patriarchal marriage. They perceive the marital bond as a restrictive bond, which took their liberty, delayed their growth and condemned them to the traditional gender role of caring for the family members. The marital framework deprived them of the ability to manage their lives as independent and mature people. Widowhood, on the other hand, made a difference in their lives and allowed them, perhaps for the first time, to feel independent and free.

This sense of independence is made possible not only by the fact that they are widows and live alone but also by a combination of several other factors. The first factor is financial independence. Except for five women who reported a low economic status, most of the women in the current study have a pension from their work as well as the pension of their deceased husband, which allows them to maintain a reasonable – or even high – standard of living. Except for three women who reported that their sons follow movements in their bank accounts, most of the women reported financial independence and the ability to spend money without having to report back or get a husband's approval. The second factor relates to Israeli social norms which allow women to live alone and to go out and spend time alone without the need for male accompaniment or supervision. This contrasts with traditional societies, such as Arab society in Israel (Kulik and Faisal, 2005) where widowed, divorced, single and married women live under the constant supervision of men in the family (fathers, brothers or husbands) who restrict their

movement. A third factor enabling the widows' independence is their good health relative to their age; all of the women are physically independent and do not need assistance.

These findings regarding the widows' sense of independence are in line with Eipper (2009). Although Eipper (2009) examined how older women's perceived independence in post-widowhood repartnering, the women in her study admitted the need to compromise on certain aspects of their independence in order to be in a romantic relationship and to create clear boundaries in the relationship to protect their autonomy.

Looking at widowhood from the feminist gerontology perspective provides an opportunity to understand the experience of widowhood and its various aspects through the eyes of the older widows themselves, without ignoring the differences between them. The discourse is not homogeneous or cohesive but, rather, reflects a wide range of experiences related to cultural and social contexts, such as class, religion, age, ethnicity or nationality, leading each widow to experience her widowhood differently (Arber *et al.*, 2003; Krekula, 2007).

In the Israeli context, it seems that even when the gender contract comes to an end, the intergenerational contract still exists, and many widows continue to fulfil the role of care-givers by taking care of their grandchildren (Berkovitch and Manor, 2019). Due to the familial characteristics of Israeli society, widows are expected to be devoted grandmothers and to continuing caring for their grandchildren and thus helping their children even after the death of their husbands. In this way, the intergenerational contract remains active, even if the couple's gender contract has ended.

Compared to other modern, western countries, Israeli society is considered modern in some aspects and traditional in others, such as family patterns. Israeli society is a familial society in which the family occupies a central place in everyday life, *e.g.* regular family meals are a norm (Fogiel-Bijaoui, 2002). As a result, a second relationship in old age is still considered fairly unacceptable in Israel, and marital relationships that develop after widowhood are usually perceived as fundamentally different from the previous relationship (Koren and Lowenstein, 2008).

In conclusion, along with the unique characteristics derived from the centrality of the family in Israeli society, which affect a widow's decision to live without a new partner, there are also characteristics common to all older widows beyond the local context. These are women aged 65–85 who belong to the same generation and the same cohort and who have undergone similar socialisation processes with regards to the division of gender roles in the family. Thus, for example, women in England, as well as in other countries including Israel, were educated that the instrumental roles are the responsibility of the men in the family while the main role of the women is the care of family members (Bennett *et al.*, 2010). The experience of independence that the widows in the current study discuss therefore relates to both the local and the global social, cultural and gender context.

The current study presents the less-heard voice of independent widows who enjoy social and economic freedom and dare to say so. In doing so, it legitimises a more affirmative discourse on widowhood and helps shatter the myth of the lonely and dependent widow. Despite this important contribution, the study has several limitations. First, the size of the sample and the variability of the participants are limited as the research is based on a qualitative method with a relatively

small number of subjects. This hinders the ability to generalise the findings to a wider population. In order to achieve wider generalisation, there is need for further research using a larger and more diverse sample. Second, during the interviews, additional variables emerged that might impact a widow's decision to live without a partner. These include the time that has passed since becoming a widow, the circumstances of the husband's death (sudden or expected), the quality of the marriage prior to widowhood, the availability of a supportive community and network of deep social connections, the location of children and extended family, the widow's geographical area of residence, and more. Further research is necessary to examine the influence of these variables on the choice patterns of widows.

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