



## ROLE CONFLICT AMONG WIDOWS: A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY

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**Abstract:** This paper deals with role conflict of the widows who have lost their husband. It is noticed that the widows are bound to engage themselves in different income generating activities. On the other hand, working widows have to play dual roles in their everyday working life. Apart from the working widows, some of the widows have to take complete parental responsibility. At the same time a widow has to play the role of both mother and father. Therefore, role conflict may take place in mind of widow. Considering this, an attempt has been made to find out whether role conflict is taken or not significantly the study reveals that role conflict is connected with widowhood and they have gathered the experience of role-conflict in their everyday life.

**Keyword:** *Widow, Widowhood, Role conflict*

### Introduction:

Widowhood is a period of burden in women's life; it often changes the role of women. She is compelled to take a number of responsibilities in and outside of their family. It brings changes in her role taking abilities in comparison to her previous married life. Actually, widowhood is an additional social roles attached with middle and later life. After the demise of her husband, a widow deals with the loss of the role and identity of being apart of decent couple. In this regard, Atchley(2004) opined that "some of the women are glad their husbands had left. A large proportion of elder abuse consists of long standing spouse abuse. His study depicts that sometime marriage stands as problem for both husband and wife. Even significantly it was observed that all marriage is not idyllic and all wives do not love their husbands. Therefore role of a wife is not appreciable at all circumstances. They suffer themselves as being a wife to play its role. In some cases the wife's role is not central to identify. Moreover, many women carry their spouse identity into widowhood. The study reveals that many women who get satisfaction from being married and they are regarded as good wives."<sup>1</sup> The demise of a spouse sets an example for a series of adjustment in which the surviving spouse must not only copup with the misery and emotional suffering caused by the loss of an important relationship but also redefine their individual identities and draws a social reality which is shared by both marriage partners. If the married relation is broken due to

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<sup>1</sup>Atchley, Robert C.: Social Forces and Aging: An Introduction to Social Gerontology, Wadsworth Publishing Company, 2004.



widowhood, which shared social reality as they undertake the social roles associated with widowhood and modifies the old ones that were associated with the marriage.

It is now become unavoidable circumstances that widows have been taking the social, economic and familial role to upbringing of their family after the demise of her soul mate. In widowhood as a complex event of life role conflict is become important and stressful for every woman. They are equal to men in almost all aspects of socio-economic life because they have to carry both the responsibilities of husband and wife. Generally it is the strong belief that men are traditionally obligatory to earn and take care of the family while women have to care for the family, cook and bringing up their children. It is the beginning of role conflict because a widow entails multiple roles. Conflict between roles that are comparable to two or more statuses is known as role conflict. Role conflict is recognised as clash among the roles equivalent to two or more statuses. Generally role conflict become when a person have to play multiple roles at a single time in different positions is fronting multiple roles having with multiple statuses. While a person playing one role, he or she is linked with many 'role-others' According to Merton (1968-84) these 'role-others' with regard to a specific person form his or her role set. Merton differentiates this idea of role-set from multiple roles, which are numerous roles of the same person."<sup>2</sup> On the other hand if the different conflicting roles are associated with a particular moment is called role strain. When a person is facing with a single role that has numerous statuses, it creates a psychological dilemma. William Goode defined role stress as the felt complexity in satisfying role obligations (Goode: 1960)<sup>3</sup>. Widows have also been facing multiple roles with multiple statuses. The present study also explores issues pertaining to role conflicts between multiple roles of widows related to socio-economic and familial role. It is cleared that status of widows and mother of children has two roles i.e., mother and bread earner. After the death of her bread earner she has to play some key roles in different settings. Therefore, she faces the problem of fairly contradictory role performance.

In this study, an attempt has been made to observe whether they face role conflict or not. Keeping in view, the respondents were asked how they could perform multiple equally vital roles. Generally, a widow has to take play multiple roles at a time in n outside the family. It becomes very loadable to her to look after their economic burden with take social responsibilities which are attached to her and family. The present study shows that all the respondents are concerned about their own roles. Even they opined that role conflict always exists in their mind. They confessed that at the same time they are compelled by the circumstances to play different role. At the absence of their husbands, sometime they fail to manage their role properly.

<sup>2</sup>Robert k. Merton :*Social theory and social structure*. Free Press, 1968.

<sup>3</sup> Goode, William J. : "A Theory of Role Strain." *American Sociological Review*, vol. 25, no.4, pp. 483-496, 1960.



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### **Methodological Application:**

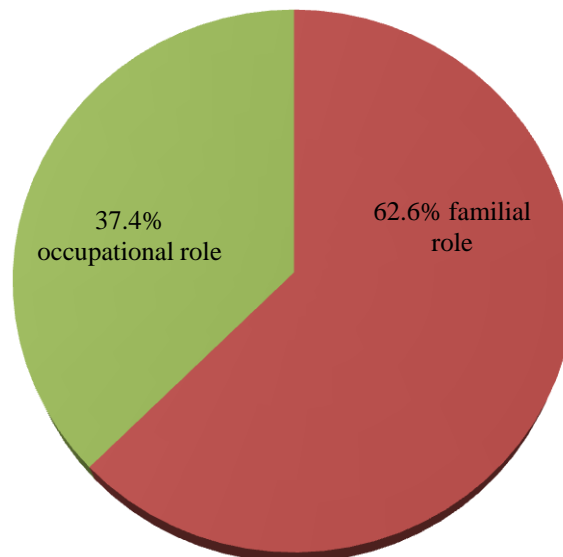
In this study, three panchayats of three blocks in Jorhat district of Assam have been selected as field of study to collect the required data. There are six blocks in the Jorhat district and among them, three blocks namely Jorhat Development Block (Baghchung), Central Jorhat Development Block (Sipahikhula) and North West Jorhat Development Block (DhekorGarha) were considered as the field of the study. On the other hand, one panchayat was selected from each block i.e. 48 No. Uttar NamaniGaonPanchayat (Baghchung Block), 47 No.DashinPorbotriyaGaonPanchayat (North West Block) and 28 No.MelengBalisaporiGaonPanchayat (Sipahikhula Block). The selected Blocks cover the largest area among the six blocks of Jorhat district with multi ethnic caste, community, religious groups.

In this study, all the widows of the selected blocks of three panchayats have been considered as the respondents i.e. 350. It was found that the widows of the field belong to age category of 18 to 87 years. They are scattered in the three blocks in where, 153(43.7%) of the respondents are found in 48 No. Uttar NamoniGaonPanchayat, 76(21.7%) respondents are found in 47 No. DashinPorbortriyaand121(34.6%) respondents are found in 28 No. MelengBalisaporigaonPanchayat under the Baghchung Development block, DhekorGarha Development Block and Sipahikhula Development Block respectively of Jorhat district of Assam.the design of the study is exploratory by nature, observation, the interview schedule, Interview guide, focus group discussion and case study method were applied to collect the appropriate data. To conduct the study both quantitative and qualitative research strategies have been applied. In this context insightful data were explored from both primary and secondary sources.

### **Nature of Affected Role:**

The study reveals that all the respondents have been facing difficulties in performing of different roles for wellbeing of their family.They play both occupational role and domestic or familial role at the same time, which make problem for them to manage both tension and pattern. The following pie diagram (1.1) shows the respondents nature of affected role in their individual profile.

**Figure No. 1.1**  
**Nature of Affected Role in Respondents Profile**



The above Figure No. 1.1 shows that, out of 350 respondents, 219(62.6%) respondents revealed that they suffered familial role most and only 131(37.4%) of respondents proclaimed that their occupational roles create the problem to them.

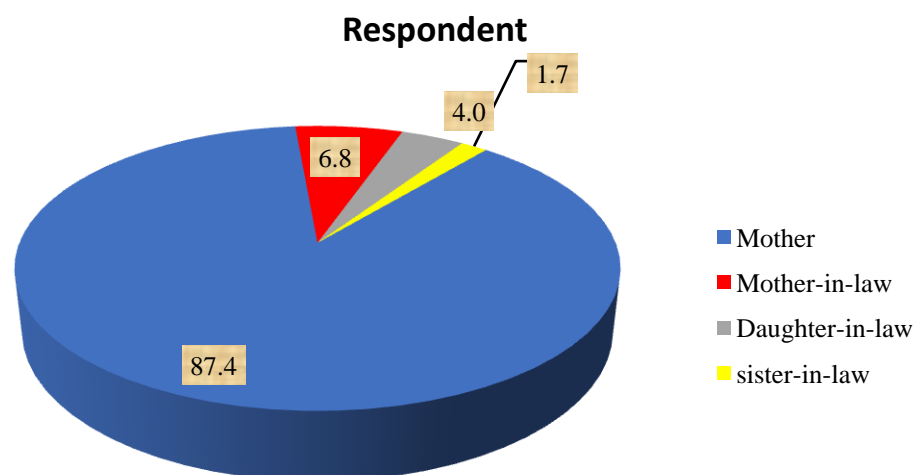
It was also observed that majority of the widows have preferred most to take both familial and parental role. But they have to do economic activities as primary income earner of her family after demise of soul partner. Basically widows hold a diverse position in their family as mother, mother-in-law, daughter-in-law, sister-in-law, home maker or head of the family at a time. Silverman(1972) rightly said in this regard that ‘There are many more roles available to the new widows. Sometimes she played a role of mother, sister or daughter which was more important than that of wife. Even after her husband’s death, these so called roles do not change and she may live life as before.’<sup>4</sup> Considering this, an attempt has been made to identify their roles in everyday life. The study depicts that they are not only a mother or daughter-in-law, but at the same they have to take prime responsibility of home maker who has to look at the all aspects of the family. The study shows that they are to play multiple familial roles. It was observed in this study, though a widow is a mother of her children; however she also is a daughter-in-law or sister-in-law.

<sup>4</sup> Silverman Phyllis :“Widowhood and Preventive Intervention,” The Family Coordinator (January, 1972).

The study reveals that out of the total 350 respondents, 306(87.4%) of respondents has played mother's role as most functional and prime role in everyday life. On the other hand, 24(6.8%) respondents play their prime role as mother-in-law and 14(4.0%) respondents admitted that their prime role is performed as daughter-in-law. On the other hand; only 6(1.7%) respondents played sister-in-law's role as prime role at their families. In this study; a good number of the respondents take total responsibilities of their families. Even they are to consider themselves as 'Home Maker'. According to the findings, respondents have a variety of responsibilities and obligations in their families, but they must also play specialised roles in the family. In common parlance women as widows have to look after all requirements and responsibilities of other family members on behalf of their deceased husbands. They must have engaged in economic activities along with familial responsibilities. Therefore, a clear role conflict have been faced by the respondents as mother, mother-in-law, daughter-in-law, sister-in-law. The respondents told that when they are to perform the role of bread earner of their families, it creates problem to them for playing other roles as mother, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law at the same time. It is a complex set of role difference where a widow have played masculine role i.e. home maker or bread earner which is the major concern of role conflict.

The following pie diagram (Fig. No.1.2) shows the distribution of major or prime roles of the respondents as their opinion.

**Figure No. 1.2 Roles played by the respondent in their family**





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## **ROLE OF STRESS AMONG WIDOWS:**

In comparison to man, a woman experiences a lot of stress in order to survive with the hassles of life as a widow. Low earnings and lack of social provision and varied responsibilities can lead multiple stresses for the widow. As a single parent the widow has to face stresses such as a demands at home or workplace, uncertainty of the future, lack of control over a situation, brooding over the past and worrying about the future, personal and social problems and financial problems and unable to meet basic needs of the family (i.e. food, clothing, health care etc.).<sup>5</sup> Due to more or less the mandatory involvement of widows in working activities they have often faces conflicting milieu in role expectations and became unable to fulfil it. As a result of it majority of them experienced some psychological effect like stress, anxiety and emotional strain etc. Further, the level and type of stress experienced by the widows is more specifically dependent on their occupational structure.

The data depicts that, out of 350 respondents, 91(26.0%) of the respondents were found in low level of stress, 121 (34.6%) respondents in moderate level and rest of another 138(39.4%) of respondents were in high level stress. Among the respondents, out of 34 numbers of private job holders, 16(47.1%), out of 23 numbers of government job holders, 13(56.5%), out of 70 numbers of small entrepreneur, 17(24.3%), out of 41 numbers of wage labours, 14(34.2%), out of 99 numbers of agricultural labour, 19(19.1%), out of 40 numbers of respondents who has been working in their own land, 9(22.5%), out of 43 numbers of not working widows, 13(30.2%) of respondents were faced low level of stress and moderate level of stress were found among 11(32.3%) private job holders, 7(30.4%) government job holders, 20(28.6%) small entrepreneur, 9(21.9%) wage labours, 30(30.3%) agricultural labour, 15(37.5%) of the respondents who has been working in their own land and 22(51.1%) of not working widows in the study. The table also shows that among the respondents, 7(20.6%) private job holder, 3(13.0%) government job holder, 33(47.1%) small entrepreneur, 18(43.9%) wage labour and 50 (50.0%) agricultural labour, 16(40.0%) of the respondents who has been working in their own land and 8(18.6%) of not working widows have felt moderate level of stress in day to day activities. Significantly, the term 'low', 'moderate' and 'high' are used as per the statement given by the respondents. In this study, interview schedule was applied to collect their remarks. Again, in a present interview the respondent used these term in terms of degree of stress. No doubt, the stress is psychological fact. It is a physical tension or feeling of emotion. Therefore in this study the respondents were asked whether they suffer from any physical symptoms like aches and pain, chest pain, exhaustion, headaches, dizziness, high blood pressure etc. due to stress of multiple responsibilities in everyday life.

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<sup>5</sup> Garza ML.:How does culture and community support help with coping among Maxican -Amereican single mothers? Arizona, 2004. University of Arizona, USA.

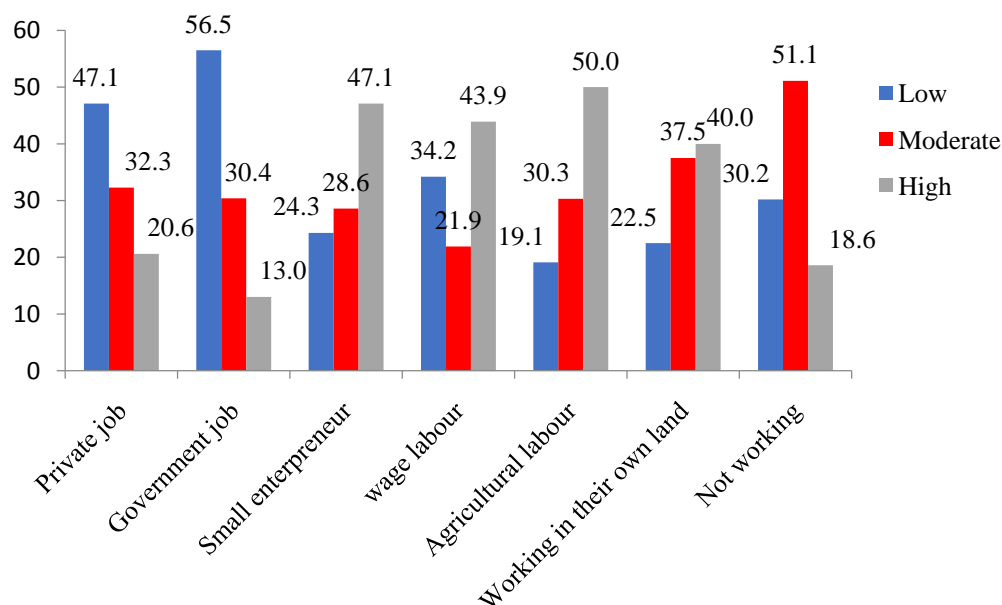
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It has observed that majority of the respondents were felt high level of stress during their life circle. It seems that, widows have to survive along with their child and with other fellow members of the family after loss of her spouse.

The level of stress of the respondents are shown in the following bar diagram, Fig. No. 1.3.

**Figure No. 1.3**  
**Level of Stress of the Respondent**



## REASONS OF STRESS OF THE RESPONDENT:

Widowhood-related stress is thought to be caused by a number of factors, including the uniqueness of the husband–wife relationship, culture-exacerbated stigma that the widow is responsible for her husband's death, in-laws' negative actions and in actions, care for the children if any, and a host of others.<sup>6</sup> Respondents were asked about the causes of stress throughout the study period, and they stated that the primary cause of stress is high workload in both occupational and domestic tasks, time management in both occupational and familial roles, and responsibility in family. The reason of stress of the respondent by their occupational level are shown in the following Table No. 1.4

<sup>6</sup>Ngozi Iruloh, Betty-Ruth & Elsie, Williams : *Adjustment Strategies of Widows to Widowhood Stress Based on Their Age: The Case of Rivers State, Nigeria* in British Journal of Education; Vol.6, No.1, pp.76-91, January 2018.

**Table No. 1.4 Reasons of stress of the respondent**

S. No.	Category of respondent	Reason of stress								Total
		Excessive workload		Time management		Economic dependency		Family responsibilities		
		F	P	F	P	F	P	F	P	
i.	Private job	17	50.0	23	67.6	11	32.4	21	61.8	34
ii.	Government job	10	43.5	18	78.3	6	26.1	18	78.3	23
iii.	Small entrepreneur	38	54.3	41	58.6	59	84.3	44	62.8	70
iv.	Wage labour	23	56.1	21	51.2	35	85.4	29	70.7	41
v.	Agricultural labour	68	68.7	72	72.7	75	75.7	70	70.7	99
vi.	Working in their own land	16	40.0	18	45.0	27	67.5	29	72.5	40
vii.	Not working	0	0.0	0	0.0	43	100	32	74.4	43
	total	172	49.1	193	55.1	256	73.1	243	69.4	350

Source : Field Survey

The table reveals that, out of 350 respondent, 172(49.1%) of the respondents stress was affected by excessive workload, 193(55.1%) of the respondent was for time management, 256(73.1%) was for economic dependency and 243(69.4%) of respondents faced stress due to family responsibilities.

In the domain, it was observed that 17(50.0%) private job holder, 38 (54.3%) small entrepreneur, 23(56.1%) wage labour, 68(68.7%) agricultural labour and 23(56.1%) of respondents who have been working in their own land are affected more stress due to excessive workload than 10(43.5%) government job holders. The service holders have been doing both private and government sector and they are more responsible as well as loyal to the concerned authority. As their duty they have to maintain both normal and additional duties. On the other hand, business holders are seen in doing animal husbandry, vegetable shop, chicken shop, grocery shop and village based beauty parlour. It is very hardship for a single spouse to manage such type of business with a loadable work. Wage labour are working as construction worker, paid servant and also agricultural labour, such as crops reaper, paddy Trans planter. They are mandatory to give maximum work for the satisfaction of employer thereby they become able to secure work. Hence, they are unable to cope with their family role.





Further, after the death of her fellow spouse a widow has to give more time to the wellbeing of the family. In order to accomplish everything, she must confine herself within a scheduled agenda. Naturally it brings stress upon herself. This was seen during domain of the study that, 23(67.6%) private job holders, 18(78.3%) government job holder, 41(58.6%) small entrepreneur, 21(51.2%) wage labour, 72(72.7%) agricultural labour have got more stress due to time management than 18(45.0%) of respondents who have been working in their own land(17.5%) in where not working widows did not get stress with time management.

‘One of the most frequently mentioned consequences for females are serious decrease in family income, participated by death of the major earner. In most analysis to date, however, this loss has been taken as given, rather than empirically examined. It is argued that widows must make an adjustment to loss in income as well as loss of the person of their spouse. Further it can be argued that the lack of proper asses in income may become the base for added problems in adapting to widowhood.’<sup>7</sup> Financial stress has also been raised among widows because they have to solve maximum economic problem as single income earner and economic dependency extended to them. It is seen in the table that 43(100%) not working widows, 35(85.4%) wage labour, 59(84.3%) small entrepreneur, 75(75.7%) agricultural labour, 11(32.4%) private job holder, 6(26.1%) government job holders, 27(67.5%) of respondents who have been working with their own land have felt stress due to economic dependency on other fellow member.

When male spouse died, the female spouse must take the major role in housekeeping, including those responsibilities that were once performed by their husband. It is a great deal of stress for working widows due to family responsibilities. From the table it is seen that, 21(61.8%) private job holders, 18(78.3%) government job holders, 44(62.8%) small entrepreneur, 29(70.7%) wage labour, 70(70.7%) agricultural labour, 29(72.5%) of respondent who have been working in their own land have faced stress due to family responsibilities. More specifically, 32(74.4%) of not working widows were felt stress caused family responsibilities. Ironically, after getting widowhood, a widow has to take all the responsibilities of her in-laws family from both famine and masculine role which is the matter of role conflict and caused stress for them.

period. But, they have been getting experience of doing both famine and masculine household task in post- widowed period.

It was observed that, above 30% of respondent usually doing the household task such as preparing meal, washing cloth, Washing utensils, repairing house and billing payment on shared basis with other family members. But below 30% of respondents perform the task of

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<sup>7</sup> Morgan, Leslie A. :*Economic Chang at Mid-Life Widowhood: A Longitudinal Analysis* in journal of Marriage and Family, vol.43, No.4(Nov.,1981), published by National Council on Family Relations.

sweeping and cleaning the home, tiding up house, home decoration purchase for basic food, purchase for other necessities by sharing with other family members.

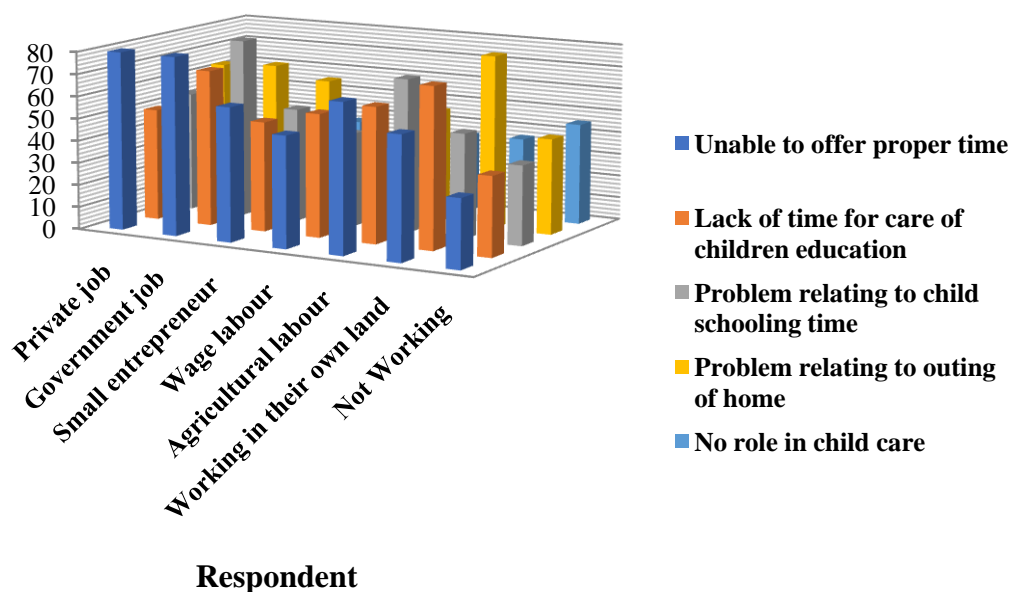
It is apparent that, below 10% of respondents has barely doing almost all the household task. Being a home maker and head of the family widows have mandatory role on this domestic works. Moreover, findings reveals that 22(6.3%) of childless widows lives on their in-laws family with nephew and cousin, who does not take on much of her household responsibilities.

### **CARE OF CHILD BEARING AND PROBLEMS OF REARING:**

Having minor child for a widowed mother is a very challenging task not only for her but also for the entire family where she resides. Mother's utmost care and attention is needed to every child when they are in early stages. But they have been getting less time for up bring of their child due to loadable work assigned by both occupational and familial side. Even after the loss of her soul partner, widowed mother have not achieved proper assistance in carrying and bearing of their child. As a result tension and conflict arise between child rearing and other responsibilities of their own. Embracing all these aspects of respondents, they were asked whether they have facing problems in caring and rearing of their child around the cluster of widowhood. It was also being observed whether any role conflict arose among the widows regarding care of children and as multiple role performer.

The following bar diagram (Fig. No.1.5) shows the distribution of Role on Child Care.

**Figure No. 1.5 Distribution of Role on Child Care**





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## Conclusion:

Above discussion shows that role-conflict is a major issue of widows. As they experiences of most stressful events in their everyday life, it sometime damage the ability to maintain some feeling of emotion. Under the pressure of socially considered sanctions, they have to limit themselves in contexts of their behaviour, but to play the most essential roles inside and outside the house they are bound to overcome the challenges coming from the society. Other hand, playing different roles at a same time give them stress and make frustrated for which conflict taken place in their mind.

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