

## Resilience among Elderly Widows in Lombok, Indonesia: A Case Study on Coping with Spousal Loss

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**Abstract:** Becoming widowed in old age is a major challenge for women, often accompanied by grief, financial vulnerability, and social marginalization. However, many widows demonstrate resilience, namely the capacity to adapt and even grow when facing adversity. This study explores resilience among elderly widows in Lombok, Indonesia, within the cultural framework of the Sasak community. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected from three participants through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation, then analyzed with Miles and Huberman's interactive model. The findings reveal that resilience develops through four interrelated stages: succumbing, survival, recovery, and thriving. Initially, participants experienced deep sorrow, but gradually adapted by reorganizing routines, relying on religious practices, and strengthening family and community ties. In some cases, this adaptation extended to the thriving stage, where widows discovered new meaning and contributed actively to their families and society. This resilience was supported by internal factors such as spirituality, optimism, self-efficacy, and emotional regulation as well as external support, including family, community networks, cultural norms, and health services. The study enriches resilience theory by confirming a staged and ecological model, while also accounting for specific cultural pathways shaped by spirituality and collectivist traditions. Practically, the findings underscore the importance of culturally grounded interventions, integrating spiritual practices, family support, and community care into counseling and social welfare programs for widows. Thus, adaptation to spousal loss is not only a psychological process, but also a culturally embedded pathway of recovery and growth.

**Keywords:** Resilience, Widowhood, Elderly Women, Lombok, Qualitative Case Study, Coping with Loss, Cultural Context

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## INTRODUCTION

The loss of a spouse in later life is one of the most significant stressors faced by older adults, often associated with grief, loneliness, declining physical health, and reduced social participation. Widowhood in old age has been linked to increased risks of depression, diminished well-being, and challenges in maintaining daily functioning (Carr & Utz, 2020). Nevertheless, many elderly individuals demonstrate the ability to adapt positively, drawing on resilience to cope with bereavement. Resilience, defined as the capacity to recover and grow in the face of adversity, has become a central concept in understanding how older adults navigate widowhood (Connor & Davidson, 2003; Ungar, 2019).

International research has explored the multidimensional nature of resilience among widows. Studies in Western contexts emphasize psychological resources such as optimism, self-efficacy, and social connectedness as protective factors (Bonanno, 2021; Luthar et al., 2022). In contrast, research in Asian societies highlights the interplay of cultural norms, spirituality, and family networks in sustaining resilience during widowhood (Chong et al., 2019; Kim & Kim, 2021). More recently, scholars have examined resilience as a dynamic process rather than a fixed trait, suggesting that elderly widows move through stages of survival, recovery, and growth (O'Leary & Ickovics, 2021). Despite these contributions, most studies are conducted in Western or urban contexts, with less attention given to resilience among widows in rural or religiously conservative communities.

In collectivist cultures, resilience is often shaped not only by individual coping mechanisms but also by social roles and communal expectations. For instance, studies in South Asia and the Middle East reveal that widowhood is experienced within cultural frameworks that may restrict women's autonomy while simultaneously providing social support through extended kinship structures (Ahmed & Khan, 2020; Maheshwari, 2022). These dynamics underscore the importance of studying resilience within specific cultural and religious contexts, where traditional values can both hinder and support adaptation to spousal loss.

Indonesia provides a unique setting for such an inquiry. As a Muslim majority country with strong family values, widowhood is often interpreted not only as a personal tragedy but also as a social and religious challenge. In Lombok, West Nusa Tenggara, the Sasak community is known for its patriarchal traditions, where women's roles are closely tied to family and domestic responsibilities. For elderly widows, losing a spouse may intensify economic and social vulnerabilities, yet spirituality, community support, and familial networks often serve as critical buffers. Previous Indonesian studies have addressed resilience in general elderly populations (Hidayati & Ratnawati, 2021) or in the context of natural disasters (Rahmawati & Pertiwi, 2020), but few have specifically focused on widowhood in rural, culturally conservative settings.

This study seeks to fill that gap by examining resilience among elderly widows in Lombok, Indonesia, through a qualitative case study approach. It aims to describe how widows navigate the process of coping with spousal loss, identify the internal and external factors that support resilience, and situate these

findings within broader theoretical and cultural discussions on widowhood. By doing so, the research contributes to both the academic discourse on resilience and the practical design of counseling and community support programs for elderly widows in similar contexts.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to explore resilience among elderly widows coping with spousal loss in Lombok, Indonesia. A case study design was chosen to allow in-depth exploration of lived experiences within the cultural and social context of the Sasak community. Three elderly widows from Dusun Egok, Gerung District, were selected through purposive sampling, with criteria including: (a) women aged 60 years and above, (b) widowed for more than one year, and (c) willingness to participate in the study. Data were collected using multiple techniques: semi-structured interviews focusing on coping strategies, personal narratives, and social support; direct observations of daily activities; and documentation from family and community records to provide contextual insights.

Data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's interactive model, consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles et al., 2014). The analysis sought to identify themes related to stages of resilience (succumbing, survival, recovery, thriving) and factors contributing to adaptation, including internal and external resources. Triangulation of data sources and member checking were employed to enhance credibility, while confidentiality and informed consent ensured adherence to ethical standards in qualitative research. This methodological design enabled a holistic understanding of resilience processes, grounded in both psychological theory and the cultural-religious context of the participants.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Stages of Resilience among Elderly Widows**

The narratives of the elderly widows in Lombok show that the experience of losing a spouse is initially devastating, producing intense grief and a sense of helplessness. In the stage commonly identified as succumbing, participants described their daily lives as disrupted and their emotions as dominated by sadness, fear, and loneliness. One participant, for example, recounted that "after my husband died, even the laughter of my grandchildren could not fill the emptiness of the house." This illustrates how bereavement, particularly in old age, is not merely a private emotional loss but also a disruption of identity and roles. Studies by Carr and Utz (2020) in the United States support this finding, noting that widowhood in later life often undermines self-concept because elderly women may lose not only a companion but also a key source of financial and social stability.

As time passed, however, the widows' accounts revealed a gradual transition from succumbing to survival. In this phase, participants began to reorganize their lives by re-engaging with daily routines and taking on responsibilities previously

managed by their husbands. For example, managing finances and making household decisions were tasks that some widows encountered for the first time in their lives. This pragmatic adjustment, while challenging, also served as a foundation for restoring a sense of control. Such experiences are consistent with Bonanno's (2021) theory of everyday resilience, which emphasizes how widows manage grief by focusing on problem-solving and task-oriented behaviors. Thus, survival represents a shift from paralysis to functionality, where widows are not yet fully healed but are actively seeking ways to stabilize their lives.

Furthermore, the widows' narratives demonstrate that survival was eventually followed by recovery. In this stage, participants reported greater acceptance of their circumstances and an ability to regulate their emotions more effectively. They described finding solace in religious practices such as daily prayers and Qur'anic recitation, which not only eased their sorrow but also allowed them to reinterpret their experiences within a spiritual framework. One widow explained, "When I cry in prayer, I feel like Allah is listening, and I feel lighter." This reliance on faith reflects the centrality of spirituality in recovery processes, especially in collectivist and religiously devout societies. Research by Chong et al. (2019) among widows in Malaysia and Singapore also highlights the role of religious practices in fostering emotional healing and social reintegration. In this sense, recovery is not simply the cessation of grief but a constructive reorientation that incorporates loss into a broader narrative of meaning.

In some cases, the process of resilience extended beyond recovery into thriving. Thriving was observed when widows not only accepted their loss but also experienced personal growth and a renewed sense of purpose. One participant became actively involved in women's religious groups, while another took pride in mentoring her grandchildren and offering advice to younger community members. These accounts suggest that widowhood, although painful, can also serve as a catalyst for empowerment and social contribution. This stage resonates with Ungar's (2019) view that resilience is not merely bouncing back but moving forward with greater strength and purpose. However, the participants also noted that thriving did not occur in a linear fashion. At times, financial hardship or health problems caused them to revert temporarily to earlier stages of survival. This fluidity supports the findings of Kim and Kim (2021), who emphasize that resilience in widowhood is best understood as a fluctuating process rather than a fixed pathway.

### **Internal and External Factors Supporting Resilience**

In addition to these stages, the widows' resilience was sustained by a complex interplay of internal and external factors. Internally, spirituality emerged as the most consistent and powerful source of strength. Participants repeatedly emphasized that prayer, Qur'anic recitation, and trust in divine will provided them with comfort and purpose. This echoes Maheshwari's (2022) research on widows in India, which found that spiritual belief systems significantly reduce feelings of isolation and hopelessness. Moreover, spirituality not only functioned as a coping mechanism but also as a source of identity reconstruction, allowing widows to see themselves as individuals still valued by God and their community.

Alongside spirituality, optimism played an important role in maintaining resilience. Participants described holding on to hope for their children's futures, believing that their sacrifices would eventually bring better opportunities for the next generation. This positive outlook aligns with Bonanno's (2021) findings that optimism predicts long-term adaptation among bereaved individuals. Optimism also worked in tandem with self-efficacy, as widows developed confidence in their ability to handle new responsibilities. For instance, one participant expressed pride in learning how to negotiate with market vendors, a task once handled by her husband. This reflects the concept of mastery and competence as key protective factors in resilience, as described by Connor and Davidson (2003).

Another internal factor was emotional regulation. Widows reported intentionally restraining their grief in front of their children, stating that they did not want to "add to the burden" of their families. While this reflects cultural expectations in collectivist societies, it also demonstrates the capacity to manage emotions for the sake of relational harmony. Emotional regulation has been widely documented as an essential resilience factor, allowing individuals to maintain social bonds even during personal distress (Luthar et al., 2022). Over time, these practices also contributed to the widows' self-esteem, as they came to view themselves not as dependents but as contributors to family well-being.

Externally, family support was a central determinant of resilience. Children and grandchildren provided not only financial help but also companionship and a sense of belonging. Participants described moments of joy when spending time with grandchildren, which served as reminders of continuity and legacy. These findings are consistent with Carr and Utz's (2020) work, which emphasizes the protective role of intergenerational bonds in widowhood. Moreover, community networks offered additional layers of support. Religious gatherings, women's associations, and neighborhood activities created safe spaces where widows could share experiences and receive empathy from peers.

In addition, cultural and religious norms also shaped resilience in ambivalent ways. On the one hand, patriarchal traditions limited women's independence and reinforced their reliance on family structures. On the other hand, these same traditions mandated community responsibility toward widows, ensuring that neighbors and extended kin felt morally obliged to provide assistance. This dual function of culture is echoed in Ahmed and Khan's (2020) research in South Asia, which shows that cultural norms can simultaneously constrain autonomy and enable collective care. Finally, although limited, access to public health programs provided widows with practical support, particularly in addressing age-related illnesses. These resources, though modest, reinforced widows' confidence that their well-being was not entirely overlooked by society.

## Synthesis

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that resilience among elderly widows in Lombok is shaped by both universal processes and context-specific dynamics. Universally, the stages of succumbing, survival, recovery, and thriving echo resilience patterns observed in diverse contexts worldwide, suggesting that

widowhood tends to trigger a predictable trajectory of adaptation. Yet the Lombok case illustrates that the resources drawn upon in each stage are deeply embedded in cultural and religious frameworks. Thus, while grief and adaptation are common human experiences, the pathways to resilience vary depending on the cultural ecology in which widows are situated.

Furthermore, the study confirms and extends existing resilience theories. The progression through stages validates O’Leary and Ickovics’s (2021) model of resilience as a process, while the reliance on spiritual and communal supports resonates with Ungar’s (2019) ecological model, which views resilience as emerging from interactions between individuals and their environments. By showing how spirituality, kinship obligations, and cultural expectations intertwine in Lombok, the study adds nuance to global resilience literature that has often been dominated by Western perspectives emphasizing individual psychological traits.

Consequently, the Lombok case underscores the need for culturally sensitive approaches in both research and practice. For scholars, the findings highlight that resilience cannot be understood in abstraction from cultural context; rather, it must be studied as a culturally mediated process. For practitioners, the widows’ reliance on spiritual practices and community ties suggests that effective interventions should integrate faith-based resources and family support systems rather than relying solely on individual counseling models. For policymakers, the ambivalence of cultural norms suggests the importance of strengthening protective aspects of tradition while addressing its restrictive dimensions.

In conclusion, the resilience of elderly widows in Lombok exemplifies how universal processes of adaptation intersect with unique cultural pathways. By situating resilience within the lived realities of a Muslim-majority, collectivist, and patriarchal community, this study not only validates existing theories but also enriches them by revealing culturally specific mechanisms of coping and growth. In doing so, it contributes to a more inclusive and globally relevant understanding of resilience in widowhood.

## CONCLUSION

The present study explored resilience among elderly widows in Lombok, Indonesia, by examining their lived experiences following spousal loss. The findings revealed that resilience is not a fixed attribute but a dynamic process characterized by shifting stages of succumbing, survival, recovery, and thriving. At first, widows faced profound grief and a sense of disorientation, yet over time they learned to adapt by reorganizing daily routines, relying on religious practices, and strengthening ties with family and community. In some cases, this adaptation extended beyond recovery into thriving, as widows discovered renewed meaning and contributed actively to their families and communities. This trajectory resonates with existing theories of resilience but also underscores that the pathways widows traverse are heavily shaped by cultural and religious contexts.

The study further showed that resilience is sustained through the interaction of internal and external factors. Internally, spirituality, optimism, self-efficacy,

and emotional regulation provided widows with the capacity to reinterpret their experiences and rebuild confidence. Externally, family support, community networks, cultural norms, and access to health services created an enabling environment that cushioned the widows from the full impact of bereavement. Taken together, these findings affirm that resilience in widowhood is multidimensional, integrating psychological resources with socio-cultural ecologies. By situating resilience within the Sasak community, the research expands global discussions on bereavement and adaptation, offering empirical insights from a Muslim-majority, collectivist, and patriarchal society that remains underrepresented in resilience literature.

The findings of this study carry implications for theory, practice, and policy. From a theoretical perspective, the study confirms the validity of stage-based and ecological models of resilience while extending them to account for culturally specific pathways. By documenting how widows in Lombok draw on spirituality, kinship obligations, and community norms, the research challenges universalist assumptions and highlights the need for resilience scholarship that is sensitive to context. From a practical standpoint, the study suggests that interventions for widows should incorporate spiritual practices and family-based approaches alongside conventional counseling. Counselors and social workers must recognize that in societies such as Lombok, the family and community serve as indispensable sources of resilience, and ignoring these elements would limit the effectiveness of support programs. From a policy angle, the results point to the necessity of designing social welfare and health programs that empower widows not only economically but also psychosocially. Governments and local institutions should develop structured initiatives that integrate cultural strengths, such as religious gatherings and communal care, while also addressing structural inequalities that may restrict widows' autonomy. Furthermore, future research is encouraged to adopt mixed methods and cross-cultural designs to validate and compare resilience pathways across different settings, thereby enriching the global discourse.

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