

## Involuntary freedom in elderly widows- Narrative insights

*Liberdade involuntária em idosas viúvas –  
Olhares narrativos*

Sílvia Carriço  
Rui Neves

**ABSTRACT:** Due to the existing age gap between the average life expectancy of males and females, the widowhood process in old age is mainly experienced by women. In light of this, this study aims to understand the state of widowhood from a female perspective, analysing its impact at the level of lifestyle choices, in addition to identifying the changes that took place in the lives of elderly women and to what extent widowhood influences the choice of daily life as well as leisure activities. This is an exploratory-descriptive study that resorts to a qualitative methodology, using a study group comprising 30 elderly widowed women, aged 65 or above. Data were collected during semi-structured individual interviews and its content was analysed with the WebQda Software (Web Qualitative Data Analysis). Results show that becoming a widow gave the elderly a greater sense of independence and freedom. Simultaneously, it also showed that in the early years of widowhood, widows experience more feelings of grief and nostalgia for their loved ones (feeling of missing someone immensely).

**Keywords:** Ageing; Widowhood; Activities.

**RESUMO:** *O processo de viuvez na terceira idade é predominantemente vivido pelas mulheres, devido ao diferencial etário entre a esperança média de vida do sexo feminino face ao masculino. Nesse contexto, através deste estudo, pretende-se compreender como o estado de viuvez feminino influenciou as opções de estilo de vida, identificando as alterações originadas em mulheres idosas e influencia as diferentes atividades do dia a dia e de lazer. Com uma metodologia qualitativa, assume-se como um estudo exploratório-descritivo, realizado junto de um grupo constituído por 30 idosas na situação de viúvas e com idade igual ou superior a 65 anos. Para a recolha de dados optou-se pela realização de entrevistas semiestruturadas, sendo posteriormente os dados analisados em termos de conteúdo e tratados com o suporte do Software WebQda (Web Qualitative Data Analysis). Os principais resultados evidenciam que o facto de as idosas terem ficado viúvas lhes deu maior independência e sensação de liberdade, apesar de o estudo inferir, igualmente, que a viuvez possui um impacto marcante, porquanto se observa uma tendência exponencial para a descrição de emoções associadas ao processo de luto.*

**Palavras-chave:** *Envelhecimento; Viuvez Feminina; Atividades.*

## **Introduction**

In broad terms the ageing process can be influenced by one's lifestyle, the surrounding environment or even genetic and hereditary factors. Moniz (2003) considers that the changes the body undergoes during the ageing process should not be regarded as disease, but as natural changes in body structures.

In everyday life ageing simply means getting older. This is true only during the human being's development or growth phase, in which there is no evidence of decline in the individual's status.

It is important to stress that the ageing process relies on diversity and that there is no unique way of ageing; each elderly person ages in their own way, pending some general trends (Oliveira, 2008).

According to Galisteu, Facundim, Ribeiro and Soler (2006), currently there is a constant search for quality of life. It depends on such factors as healthy living, but also on the biological and psychosocial wellbeing associated with the living conditions and

related to such aspects as health, housing, education, leisure, transportation facilities, individual freedom, work, self-esteem, among others.

In a study with 100 respondents evaluated quantitatively and 30 evaluated qualitatively, Basil (2010, p.18) learned that the elderly "Need affection, and leisure activities that promote group interaction and a have a sense of belonging". Gaspari and Schwartz (2005) consider that, for the elderly, leisure is paramount, given the sudden and significant increase in free time of those who no longer have to work.

The elderly seeking leisure activities are not only seeking a better quality of life, but also trying to free themselves from "social stereotypes that afflict and label them" as "growingly decadent and unproductive, the older they get" (Gaspari & Schwartz, 2005, p.72).

On the other hand, the existing literature shows that a percentage of elderly people who lost their spouse refuse to join in fun and recreational activities because, for them, widowhood must be accompanied by voluntary deprivation or at least a more passive social participation (Magalhães, 2003). Hisatugo (2002) highlights that the difficult art of surviving the absence of important people enables one to have a fresh start. For Baldin (2008), the number of widows is significantly higher due to the women's higher life expectancy and the tendency for widowers to find another mate.

## **Methodology**

The main objective of this study was to characterise the changes in the daily lives of elderly widows. The study was developed around a key question: What is the relationship between widowhood and daily activities?

Therefore, the intention was to identify changes caused by widowhood in elderly women and how this influenced their options concerning different daily activities. The study group totalled 30 elderly widows, divided into three groups: up to 3 years of widowhood; between 3 and 12; and more than 12 years.

The data collection instrument used was the semi-structured interview. Previously, a script for interviews (previously validated) was organised and later transcribed in full.

The data collected from the interviews were treated using the categorical content analysis technique (Bardin, 2007). In order to organise and deepen the data processing,

the software WebQDA version 1.0 was used. The WebQDA (Web Qualitative Data Analysis) software is used for qualitative data analysis in a distributed and collaborative environment in the field of research in humanities and social sciences, thus providing numerous advantages in the analysis of qualitative data.

The processing of the data from the interviews was done by means of content analysis. Taking into account that all parts are relevant, a system of categories and subcategories was organised keeping in mind the discourse of the elderly women. The category system used was the one shown in Table 1:

Categories	Subcategories
<b>Freedom</b>	<b>Daily activities</b> - reference to household chores, cooking, cleaning the house. <b>Travel</b> - reference to trips made after becoming a widow, namely abroad. <b>Autonomy</b> - freedom in the sense that one does not owe anyone explanations.
<b>Leisure</b>	<b>Physical activities</b> - activities like walking, dancing, water aerobics, etc. <b>Manual activities</b> - activities such as cooking, doing embroidery, sewing. <b>Intellectual activities</b> - activities such as reading, computer, learning new subjects.
<b>Economic status</b>	<b>Limitations</b> - financial constraints experienced after becoming a widow, decreased purchasing power. <b>Satisfaction</b> - financial satisfaction.
<b>Spirituality</b>	<b>Religious values</b> - Support in faith and religion in order to lessen the pain felt by loss.
<b>Time management</b>	<b>For others</b> - reference to an increase of time to dedicate to others. <b>For themselves</b> - reference to increased time for themselves after becoming widows.
<b>Social networks</b>	<b>Family</b> - help and support given by the family. <b>Friends</b> - help and support given by friends. <b>Neighbours</b> - creation of associations to help widowed neighbours.
<b>Solitude</b>	<b>Sadness</b> - reference made to feelings of sadness and emotions brought about by the loss of a spouse. <b>Longing</b> - references to the longing felt, combined with loneliness.
<b>No changes</b>	Reference to no changes occurring after widowhood

Table 1 – Category system – the elderly women’s daily activities

## Presentation and discussion of findings

Following there is a presentation and discussion of the findings using the defined structure of categories. Additionally, graphs resulting from the cross tabulation of the study group’s ratings / characteristics (length of widowhood, age, qualifications) and the categories that emerged from the analysis of the interviews (Table 1) are presented. This cross tabulation is important in order to find patterns in the data coded in the different categories / subcategories.

***Freedom in the elderly women’s discourse***

Firstly, there is a description of the cross tabulation between the categories freedom and education of the elderly women, age and length of widowhood.

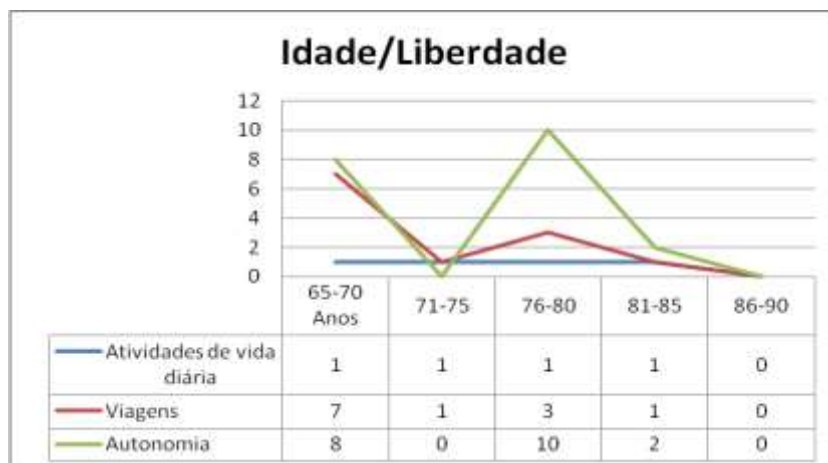


Graph 1: Cross tabulation Education and Freedom categories

From the results presented in Graph 1, one can see to what extent the level of education of the interviewed elderly widows relates to the freedom category.

By observing the data, one found that, both in terms of basic education, and the pursuit of higher education (university), the responses confirm the existence of an interrelation between those who have these levels of education and their personal freedom; one also highlights the total references made to autonomy.

Travel and autonomy are the most mentioned subcategories in the narratives of elderly women with a higher education. With regards to the respondents with no schooling, one of them responded affirmatively to daily activities, none mentioned travel, and three mentioned autonomy. Finally, 1<sup>st</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> cycle has fewer occurrences involving the freedom factor, with no response given with regard to daily activities, one for travel and one for autonomy. Despite the differences in categories, this chart shows, on the whole, that regardless of the level of qualifications, the elderly women reported that widowhood gave them a sense of freedom.



Graph 2: Cross tabulation between the age and freedom categories

Regarding the interrelation between the age and freedom categories, the results contained in Graph 2 show that younger respondents, between 65 and 70 years of age, are the ones claiming to have gained more freedom after widowhood, totalling sixteen responses. Immediately following, with fourteen responses, is the age range 76 to 80 years of age. Finally, no response on any of the items was given by the older respondents, between 86 and 90 years of age. The idea of widowhood associated with more freedom coincides with the opinion of Barros (2004) who states that for women born in the first five decades of the twentieth century and taught to be housewives and submissive to their fathers and then their husbands, widowhood may represent freedom.



Graph 3: Cross tabulation between the length of widowhood and freedom categories

Regarding the interrelation between the length of widowhood and the freedom categories, the results displayed in graph 3 indicate that once again the most recent widows, totaling twelve references, stated that they felt a sense of freedom after

widowhood: there was one register in daily activities, four in travel and seven in autonomy. Women who have been widows for longer than 12 years totalled thirteen responses.

In a synthesis of the results obtained in the graphs for the category freedom, one found that younger respondents as well as those with more qualifications stated they felt a greater sense of autonomy associated with widowhood.

In the category freedom as well as the set of subcategories emerging from the content analysis of the discourses of the elderly widows interviewed, one can understand the changes triggered by this new state.

One found that the fact that they became widows gave them a greater sense of independence and freedom, as seen in the examples given in Table 4: these were some of the positive aspects of widowhood mentioned when asked about the changes occurring after widowhood, and what they did differently after they became widows. From the answers one found that elderly women value their autonomy and their freedom, as indicated below:

*“After becoming a widow I felt more liberated, right? One has a different sense of freedom, it is nothing like what it used to be; Now, I get in my car and go for a drive, I go here and there? And before I became a widow I couldn't do that.” (Mariana, 66).*

The discourses enable the recognition of the women's role in everyday life, in the domestic sphere, at the level of home care, meal preparation, and widowhood has released them from these routine tasks:

*“The only different thing is that before I had to wake up at seven o'clock every morning to prepare breakfast; meals had to be prepared on time; now if I feel like sleeping in I no longer have that concern.” (Teresa, 73).*

The elderly women also refer that widowhood has brought along the opportunity to travel, in addition to increasing their sense of autonomy, thus reinforcing the fact that this was a positive change brought about by widowhood:

*"I have travelled more in the past five years than I did my entire life."*  
(Daniela, 65).

According to Carvalho and Mota (2002), independence and autonomy are key aspects of the quality of life; the more elderly feel independent and autonomous, the higher the positive image of themselves, as stated by some elderly:

*"It seems stupid to say this, but widowhood has set me free; it is sad to say it, but it is true."* (Carlota, 76).

*"... we feel free and are answerable to no one."* (Mariana, 66).

In Table 4 one can find the units of register pertaining to the subcategories of freedom.

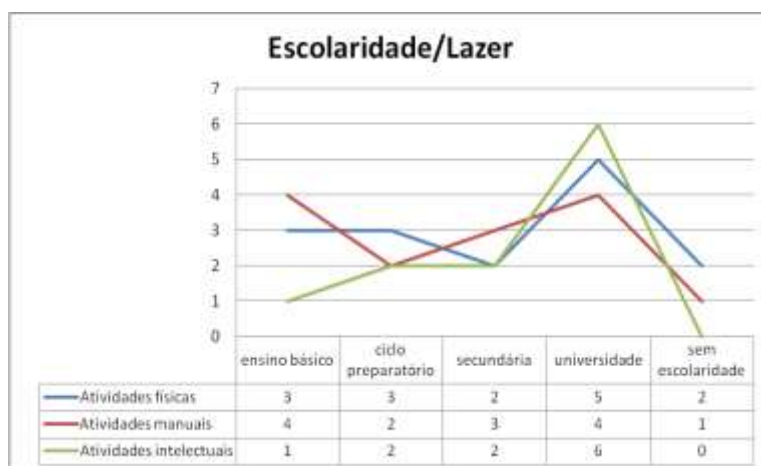
Subcategories	Units of register
<b>Daily activities</b> (4)	<i>"I have started to like me. I no longer have concerns with food, everything (...)."</i> <i>"The difference is found at the level of eating, now I eat what I want and what I feel like eating, I only cook when I feel like it, it is a huge difference for me (...)."</i>
<b>Travel</b> (10)	<i>"I didn't socialise as much as I do now, I didn't go to the cinema or even for a walk. Now I have already been abroad, for the first time in my life, I have started going abroad, which I had never done, the changes were huge!"</i> <i>"To tell you the truth I have only missed my husband. I didn't miss certain outings, I didn't go anywhere for a while but then I started going again."</i> <i>"(...) positive, for example, since I became a widow I have been three times to Brazil, which I would not probably do if I were married."</i> <i>"After my husband died my life changed completely, I have been abroad to France, the USA, I have been around, I have been on holiday, I had never been on Holiday."</i>
<b>Autonomy</b> (10)	<i>"After I became a widow, I felt a little freer."</i> <i>"(...)it's independence, the positive aspect is that one is free, involuntarily, but free."</i> <i>"Especially independence. Now I am in-de-pen-dent!! I do whatever I want and feel like doing, conscientiously of course! I am my own boss because when we are married, in their time people depended on their husbands and my husband had to agree on everything I wanted to do, I used to say it was much like being in the army, (...)."</i> <i>" (...) I mean, one is free in a way one wasn't before, this is one of the positive aspects of widowhood, right now I don't worry about anyone."</i> <i>"Now I am a free woman, I am also no longer a child, I go wherever I want, whenever I can (...)."</i>

Table 4: Category Freedom

### ***Leisure with multiple facets***

In this item there is a cross tabulation of the data pertaining to the category Leisure with the relevant classifications, such as qualifications, age and length of widowhood.





Graph 4: Cross tabulation between the qualifications and leisure categories

The results in Figure 4 show the level of education of the interviewed elderly widows as well as the leisure category, which includes the following subcategories: physical activity, manual activities and intellectual activities. When considering the results, it was easily found that "higher education" records a greater number of responses related to leisure: five for physical activity, four for manual activities and six for intellectual activities. Following, "basic education" shows the visible interrelation with pleasure, especially with manual activities.

The classification "no schooling" is the one with fewer units of registration, three in total. Considering the interrelation between qualifications and leisure, one found that elderly women who have more qualifications mention participation in various types of activities, and here there is also a strong interrelation with the time factor. Many of them mentioned that they started doing certain activities because they have more free time.



Graph 5: Cross tabulation between the Age and Leisure categories

Regarding the analysis pertaining to the respondents' age, the results in Graph 5 illustrate the existing interrelation between age and leisure.

The age range registering a greater number of responses (seventeen) is, once again, the youngest, between 65 and 70 years of age. With ten answers, is the age range of 81 to 85 years old, registering two answers for physical activities, six for manual activities, and two for intellectual activities.

No reference is made to the age range between 86 to 90 years of age. Literature shows that older people have stereotypes in relation to leisure activities, both in terms of activities provided by society, but also regarding the constraints presented by the economic factor (Roberts, 2002).



Graph 6: Cross tabulation between the length of widowhood and the leisure categories

The results included in Graph 6 show the interrelation between the length of widowhood and the leisure categories (comprising physical and intellectual activities and manual activities). The respondents who said they would dedicate more time to leisure activities, with nineteen responses, were the most recent widows - six months to three years. Following, there are the widows between 4-12 years with twelve responses, namely six for physical activities and three for each of the remaining categories, manual activities and intellectual activities. Finally, the widows over 12 years are those who dedicate less time to leisure activities.

One might speculate that recent widows dedicate more time to leisure activities, in order to feel more busy, useful and able to accept their condition.

In this analysis, the results allow one to understand the types of activities performed by the elderly women in their daily routine and leisure time. It is highlighted

that the elderly women who attended higher education mention the subcategory intellectual activity more often. Also in this category, younger elderly are those performing more leisure activities, with special reference to physical activity, and the most recent widows are those devoting more time to leisure.

The three types of activities considered as subcategories match the daily activities and preferred activities. When asked about how they usually occupy their day to day, the elderly mention the activities listed in Table 5.

Older respondents also mentioned that performing a physical activity was an important factor in their daily routines:

*“I ride my bike every day. Wherever I need to go, I always ride my bike.” (Carolina, 68).*

For Mazo (2004), physical activity enhances the elderly to take on a more active role in society, enabling them to be more sociable

*“I advise everyone who needs to move, that no physiotherapy, nothing matches water aerobics. I cannot swim but I tell you, despite being the oldest in the group I can jump and do everything (...).” (Alice, 78).*

With regard to manual activities, they also stand out in importance, since many of the elderly mention lace, embroidery, sewing as the only distraction in their daily lives, which is consistent with Aquini and Hilgert (2003) who mention that staying active is an important step towards facilitating the elderly to perform tasks in their daily lives without any major problems and independently.

*“I enjoy knitting and lace-making, embroidery, I also enjoy cooking.” (Teresa, 73).*

In the subcategory intellectual activities the references made show that there is a relationship between the elderly women who report that their favourite activities are reading a book and going online and their schooling, as shown in Graph 4.

*“I really like reading the newspaper, if it is a book that appeals to me I also like reading, ancient subjects.” (Graciete, 84).*

For some of the respondents, the fact that they are widows prevents them from performing some kinds of activities; as referred by Magalhães (2003) some seniors refuse to participate in activities with are related to fun and recreation, for them widowhood must be accompanied by a voluntary deprivation or at the most a more passive participation:

*“I stopped going to the cinema and other things. All of that is over for me, I don’t feel like going anywhere, I have lost the will to do it.”*

(Maria Emília, 84).

Table 4, presents a synthesis of the units of register pertaining to the Leisure category:

Subcategories	Units of register
<b>Physical activities (10)</b>	<i>“I have a machine at home and I practice step at home.”</i> <i>“If I hadn’t decided to do join a gym I would feel just like those gates which are closed, stuck.”</i> <i>“I really enjoy dancing, fun things? I like folk dancing and other things.”</i>
<b>Manual activities (10)</b>	<i>“I like doing the housework, I enjoy embroidery, I made big towels for my granddaughters, friends. I have lace in everything.”</i> <i>“What I like the most is being left alone on my own, doing my things, my embroidery, my sewing.”</i> <i>“I dedicate myself entirely to lace making.”</i>
<b>Intellectual activities (10)</b>	<i>“I Enjoy reading, watching TV and going online.”</i> <i>“(…) I go online, read emails, do research.”</i> <i>“What I like doing the most is exercising my mind, read a book, collect books and postcards.”</i>

Table 5: Leisure category

## Conclusion

In this qualitative study, one sought to understand the changes brought about by widowhood in elderly women and how this status affects the different choices made with regards to their daily activities.

Through the analysis of the narratives of thirty elderly women, one tried to find patterns in their individual perspectives on widowhood, and it was possible to find common traits among them.

The time since becoming widow for each one of them was taken into consideration, as it was observed that depending on the years of widowhood, this state is perceived differently. In the first three years of widowhood, widows mentioned they experience more sadness and longing, when compared with those who have been widows for a longer period of time.

The data show that widows who attended higher education made more references to autonomy, as well as to the economic satisfaction and the time devoted to leisure activities. Also in this category, the younger widows are those dedicating more time to different activities.

Still in the leisure category, linking it to the qualifications category, it is found that the elderly who have more qualifications mentioned participating in more types of activities; thus, there is a relationship with the time factor because many of the elderly reported that they started doing certain activities because they have more free time, and this derives from the fact that they are widows.

Thus, the references to freedom and autonomy brought about by widowhood made in the discourses of the elderly are perceived as one of the positive aspects and change brought about by widowhood. The elderly suffered with the death of their partner, but over time they went on with their lives, experiencing new activities that they had never tried before and defining widowhood as involuntary freedom.

From the testimonies of the elderly women it is understood that widowhood is accompanied by a feeling of liberation, and often relief; many of them feel as if it was something wrong. This feeling reflects the way many have lived marriage relations; however, they consider that from this point onwards they should live their lives freely and enjoy every moment.

The various activities undertaken by widows showed that these are active and integrated into society. Those who perform physical activities mention that this practice contributes to their physical and mental well-being.

It should be stressed that the changes witnessed in the study group should also be framed in an analysis of the generation of the late twentieth century, namely how they described their marriage and how they lived only for their families. Future generations will possibly have the power to enable new conclusions regarding the bias caused by the "generation" factor.

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Received in 06 May 2014

Accepted in 26 May 2014

**Sílvia Carriço** – Masters in Gerontology. Community Centre of Vera Cruz – Aveiro (Portugal). Autonomous Section of Health Sciences – University of Aveiro.

E-mail: [silvia.carrico@gmail.com](mailto:silvia.carrico@gmail.com)

**Rui Neves** – Departament of Education / Research Centre for Didactics and Technology in Teacher Education - University of Aveiro (Portugal).

E-mail: [rneves@ua.pt](mailto:rneves@ua.pt)