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The challenges facing widows in African contexts: A literature review

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ABSTRACT

Widowhood in Africa presents unique challenges for women due to cultural and social factors. This paper discusses the challenges of widowhood in African contexts with a view that various social, cultural, legal, financial, and economic issues are at the centre of the challenges widows face in Africa. A thematic literature review was used to examine the multifaceted challenges faced by widows in African societies. Findings show that widows in Africa face multiple challenges, including limited healthcare access, property rights, social support, and harmful traditional practices, impacting their well-being across various dimensions. Cultural attitudes, legal barriers, resource constraints, limited awareness, and the complex interplay of these factors hinder effective interventions. The literature review also found that changing cultural norms, improving access to education and economic opportunities, and strengthening social protection systems are crucial steps towards creating a more inclusive and equitable society for widows. The paper concludes that comprehensive and coordinated strategies are necessary to address these multifaceted challenges, including legal reforms, economic empowerment, awareness campaigns, and the provision of essential resources. Further, collaborative implementation of these strategies can promote gender equality, reduce poverty, and enhance the lives of widows in African countries. Further, there is a need for the urgency of comprehensive interventions and support systems to alleviate the hardships faced by widows in African societies.

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Introduction

Even though widowhood is a global phenomenon with all regions in the world recording an increase of 9.0% from 2010 to 2025 (Loomba Foundation, 2016), widowhood in Africa is unique and can be a challenging experience for women due to various cultural and social factors. There is growing evidence indicating that in many African societies, widows are often stigmatised and marginalised, and their rights are often not recognised or protected (Lloyd-Sherlock, Corso, & Minicuci, 2016; van de Walle, 2017; Shumbamhini, 2020). For conceptual clarity, widowhood refers to the state of being a woman whose spouse has died. A widow is a woman who has lost her husband, either through death or divorce and is now living without a spouse. There has been refinement in the definition of widowhood due to increases in incidences of cohabitation, civil unions, and partnerships, to mean those who have survived without their long-term partners due to death (Chamie, 2021). Statistics on widowhood have proved to be challenging for researchers (Ude & Njoku, 2017). Among the global population, widows account for approximately 258 million. Disaggregated data on African widows is scarce. However, there is an estimated total of 22,153,905 widows in sub-Saharan Africa (Moonga, 2017). Fragmented country-based statistics also provide points of departure for analysis of widowhood in the African context. Kenya for example estimates that there are approximately 8 million widows (Odhiambo, 2023) while Nigerian widows account for approximately 15 million widows of the global widows' statistics (The Conversation Africa, 2023). Disturbing demographic information, however, has shown that child widows, with ages ranging from fifteen years onwards, are a common feature of the phenomenon of widowhood in African countries (Djuikom & Van de Walle 2018; Watson, 2018; Van de Walle 2017).

Even though the problems of widowhood have drawn global attention and interventions from the United Nations, African widows seem to have the least benefit from commissioned research and interventions. They continually experience exclusions and oppression from a socio-economic, cultural, and psychosocial perspective. One of the main challenges that widows face in Africa is

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property rights. In some cultures, in Zimbabwe, Uganda, Kenya, Burundi, and Mali, for example, widows are not entitled to inherit their husband's property, which can leave them financially vulnerable and without a means of supporting themselves and their children (Van de Walle 2017). In some cases, they may even be forced to leave their homes and communities (Dube, 2016).

Research has revealed that widows in Africa may also face discrimination and abuse with some instances where widows are viewed as cursed or responsible for their husband's death, which can lead to social exclusion and mistreatment. Widows may also be subjected to harmful traditional practices, such as forced marriage or widow cleansing, which involves having sex with a male relative or stranger to "cleanse" them of their husband's spirit.

An important research question propelled this study. The research question that prompted this study was 'what are the challenges that African widows are faced with in Africa?' This research question prompted a thematic literature search with the aim of finding out the challenges widows face that are unique to African contexts. The research question and thematic analysis of the literature reviewed have influenced the organisation of this paper into specific sections which include the introduction, the research methodology, and the discussion of findings which is organised into various thematic areas based on the findings of the study.

Research methodology

This study utilised thematic narrative literature review. This literature review is a methodological approach that involves reviewing existing literature related to a specific research topic or question to identify, analyse, and synthesise themes or patterns in the literature (Dudovskiy, 2018; Snyder, 2019; The Writing Center, 2023). This thematic literature review incorporated the literature from a variety of sources, including internet resources, journal articles, government organisations resources and policies, books, and academic articles. Some of the databases used in the search of the literature for the study were Google Scholar, African Journals (AJOL), Africa Portal, and Scopus.

The multifaceted character of the challenges experienced by widows in African societies has led to the huge selection of the literature for the paper's review. Social sciences, law, health, and economic sciences have been the domain from which the literature reviewed was solicited leading to a variation in the resources used. Sources that were included in this study were those that documented evidence including grey literature on the challenges of widows in African contexts while sources that documented widowhood challenges outside Africa were excluded. This was done to create a focused discussion and to create context relevancy. To further the discussion, the literature was then thematically synthesised (Dudovskiy, 2018). In improving the quality of the paper's critical analysis, the literature was not organised according to chronological development but rather with a focus on themes (Snyder, 2019). The inclusion of pertinent literature was deliberately done with the intention of the discussion points within the paper. Finally, the findings were synthesised and presented in a clear and concise manner. This involved summarising the key themes and patterns and discussing the implications of the findings for the challenges widows experience in the African context.

Discussion of findings

There were various discussion points from the findings of the study that share significant issues regarding widows' challenges in the African context. In the succeeding sections, the discussion shares insights into the findings of the study.

Theme 1: The Uniqueness of challenges faced by widows in Africa

Widowhood is a unique problem in Africa due to a combination of cultural, social, economic, and political factors that create significant challenges for widows. Over the decades there has been a growing outcry on the endemic challenges faced by widows in the African countries. This discussion in the preceding section reveals the uniqueness of the challenges faced by the widows in Africa.

The prominent issue facing widows in Africa is property rights. In many African cultures, widows are not entitled to inherit their husband's property, which can leave them without a means of supporting themselves and their children. This can lead to poverty, homelessness, and other forms of hardship (Isilow, 2017). This has drawn the attention of many human rights activists and non-governmental organisations handling issues of women's empowerment and human rights.

Ikpeme (2020) has argued that social stigma is widely experienced by widows in Africa. In Africa, widows are prone to stigma and exclusion from their communities due to cultural beliefs that associate widowhood with bad luck, curses, or other negative connotations. This makes widows in Africa feel extremely isolated, discriminated, and mistreated (Dube, 2022).

Unique among the experiences of widows in Africa are harmful traditional practices. Some African cultures have harmful traditional practices that affect widows, such as widow cleansing, where a widow is expected to have sex with a male relative or stranger to "cleanse" her of her husband's spirit (Mwandayi & Chirongoma, 2020). This practice can put widows at risk of sexually transmitted infections, unwanted pregnancies, and other health problems (Kebede & Maleke, 2019).

In addition to an arsenal of challenges experienced by widows in Africa, access to resources has been one common feature. Widows in Africa may have limited access to resources such as healthcare, education, and legal protection (Kebede & Maleke, 2019). This can make it difficult for them to rebuild their lives and regain independence after the loss of their husbands.

There is also widespread gender inequality for widows in the patriarchal African communities. Widows increasingly face additional discrimination and inequality due to their gender (United Nations Women in some African societies (UN Women), 2021). This can make it harder for them to access resources and support, particularly in patriarchal societies where women have fewer rights and opportunities than men.

The experiences of widows in Africa present unique circumstances. There is a complex interplay of cultural, social, economic, and political factors that create significant challenges for widows. Numerous ways to address such complex circumstances of widows would require a multi-faceted approach that includes legal protections, social support, and economic empowerment for widows (Dube, 2022).

Theme 2: How some countries compare in terms of the problems faced by widows

From the literature reviewed, there were various similarities in terms of the experiences of widows in African societies. Widows in sub-Saharan countries such as Zimbabwe, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa all face unique and diverse challenges. These countries are in West, East, and Southern Africa but have some commonalities in the problems faced by widows. Here are some comparisons of the challenges faced by widows in each of these countries:

Women in general in patriarchal societies face serious financial and economic challenges (Henna & Himanshi, 2023), which become exacerbated by widowhood. Widows in the African continent are even more prone to insurmountable economic challenges as revealed by literature. In various parts of the African continent, widows lack access to resources such as land, credit, and financial and economic support, making it difficult for them to provide for themselves and their families. In Zimbabwe, widows are often disinherited by their in-laws, which can leave them destitute (Isilow, 2017). In Kenya, many widows lack access to credit and are unable to start their own businesses (Together We Rise, 2023). In Nigeria, widows often face discrimination in inheritance laws and are denied access to their husband's property (Izzi & Fab-Eme, 2020). In South Africa, widows may struggle to access social grants or pensions due to bureaucratic barriers (Mohamed, 2020). These experiences of widows in the African continent seem to be militating against the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), particularly goals number five and ten which seek to ensure gender equality and reduce inequality respectively (Together We Rise, 2023).

Across Africa, social stigma associated with widowhood is rampant. Widows in African countries face social stigma and discrimination. Many widows are viewed as "cursed" or "unlucky" and are ostracised by their communities. In Zimbabwe, widows are often blamed for their husband's death and are subject to abuse and harassment (Isilow, 2017). In other countries such as Kenya, widows may be accused of causing their husband's death through witchcraft while in Nigeria, widows may be accused of killing their husbands or engaging in immoral behaviour (Izzi & Fab-Eme, 2020; Together We Rise, 2020). In South Africa, widows may be subject to cultural practices such as "cleansing ceremonies" which can be traumatic and humiliating (Mabunda & Ross, 2023). In South Africa, Motsoeneng and Modise (2020p.266) recorded a widow who had traumatic experiences after the death of her husband recounting that:

"Moments after the death of my husband was announced, I was expected to sit in a designated bedroom without furniture and with only a mattress to sit on. I was given a blanket and covered myself while people were there".

There is growing evidence in literature that widows are prone to legal challenges. The legal problems of widows emanate from the inheritance of property. This inheritance of property is marred by conflicting dictates between customs and traditions and inheritance laws. This paper reviewed literature from South Africa, East Africa, and West Africa and findings in the literature revealed that inheritance debacles are at the centre of widows' problems in these countries (Together We Rise, 2020, Izzi & Fab-Eme, 2020). To discuss specific circumstances of the widows for example, in Zimbabwe, inheritance laws often favour male heirs, leaving widows with little or no rights to their husband's property while in Kenya, widows are often disinherited or forced to share their husband's property with his other wives or relatives (Isilow, 2017, Together We Rise, 2020). In Nigeria, widows face discriminatory laws that deny them the right to inherit their husband's property (Olufemi & Olagunju, 2019; Izzi & Fab-Eme, 2020). In South Africa, widows may face legal battles with their in-laws over property rights (Sithole, 2020; The Mail & Guardian, 2023).

Further, evidence suggests that widows face health challenges in African societies. Such health challenges exhibit themselves in the form of stress, depression, and physical health. Many widows struggle with grief and loss, which can lead to mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. In many parts of Zimbabwe, especially the rural areas, widows may struggle to access healthcare due to poverty and lack of resources, (Mabaso, 2019), while widows in Kenya lack access to mental health services (Together We Rise, 2020). In Nigeria and South Africa widows face discrimination and stigma related to HIV/AIDS and increased risk of HIV infection due to cultural practices such as "widow cleansing" (Mabunda & Ross, 2023). In Malawi for example, Sulumba-Kapumba (2018 p:138) recorded that:

"When going through some of the hazardous ritual practices, some widows have been infected in the process with STIs and HIV and AIDS making them more vulnerable with no concrete support systems. With the absence of health care systems, many widows' health may deteriorate, and they may even die early leaving children as orphans with no one to care for them, or having the burden of caring for each other at an early stage".

Theme 3: Characteristics of countries with higher challenges experienced by widows

The challenges faced by widows in Africa are influenced by various factors, including cultural norms, legal protections, and economic opportunities. However, certain characteristics are commonly found in countries where widows encounter significant challenges. Literature has revealed the pertinent characteristics in African countries and the paragraphs below shed light on the contexts that exacerbate the difficulties faced by widows in these countries.

Many African countries have been vehemently criticised by feminists as patriarchal societies. In countries with deeply ingrained patriarchal systems, women, including widows, often face marginalization and discrimination. More commonly, widows may often struggle to assert their rights and access necessary resources due to prevailing gender norms. Stigmatization, exclusion, and limited access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities become prevalent challenges for widows in these societies (Dube, 2022).

Many humanitarian agencies in African countries have cried foul on the lack of legal protections for widows. They have demanded answers as to why some countries in Africa lack adequate legal protections to safeguard the rights of widows, particularly in terms of property ownership, inheritance, and resource allocation. In their arguments, they sadly pointed out that the absence of legal safeguards leaves widows vulnerable to exploitation and mistreatment, particularly when competing claims arise over property and resources (United Nations (UN) Women, 2020). Shumbamhini (2020 p.5) bemoaned the lack of legal protection for widows from international instruments in Africa and shared that:

“In recent decades, a variety of human rights instruments at the international, regional, and local levels have addressed human rights issues concerning women. While they are relevant, they have proven inadequate in protecting women, particularly widows”.

Another common feature among widows in African countries is economic insecurity. In countries grappling with widespread poverty and economic insecurity, widows face significant struggles in providing for themselves and their families. Limited access to land, credit, and other economic opportunities further compounds their challenges, often forcing them into informal work or begging to survive (Chant & Gutmann, 2016).

Many African societies are marred with conflict and wars. Countries affected by conflict and displacement pose additional challenges for widows. Widows in these contexts face violence, displacement, and loss of social networks. Conflict-torn countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo and Sudan have dozens of widows displaced (UN Women, 2020). Accessing basic services like healthcare and education becomes difficult, exposing them to exploitation, trafficking, and heightened vulnerabilities (Danish Refugee Council, 2023).

It is common in many African countries to have harmful traditional practices: In certain countries, harmful traditional practices, such as widow cleansing or forced marriage, place widows at risk of physical harm and perpetuate their marginalization. These practices have been found to be common in countries such as Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Kenya, South Africa, and Zambia (UN Women, 2020; Dube, 2022). These deeply ingrained practices within specific communities present formidable obstacles to improving the conditions and rights of widows.

Theme 4: Why is it difficult to deal with widowhood issues in Africa?

Widows in Africa encounter numerous economic, social, legal, and health challenges that impede their well-being and hinder their ability to thrive. While it is crucial to intervene and address these challenges, several factors contribute to the difficulty of implementing effective interventions. This article examines key factors that hinder intervention efforts and explores the complex nature of the challenges faced by widows in Africa.

One significant barrier is cultural attitudes and beliefs. Cultural attitudes and beliefs play a significant role in shaping societal perceptions of widowhood in Africa. Many cultures view widowhood as a negative or shameful status, subjecting widows to stigma and discrimination. These deeply ingrained attitudes pose a significant barrier to intervention efforts, as changing cultural norms requires comprehensive and sustained initiatives (Smith, 2017). Thomas (2021) captured how widows were subjected to discrimination and unfair practices in the North West Province in South Africa and shares that:

“During the traditional mourning period, bereaved spouses were required to adhere to mandatory social restrictions. This period was marked by relative isolation for the bereaved and, at the extreme end, stigmatization and ostracization. After the traditional mourning period, the bereaved spouses underwent mandatory traditional cleansing, after which they could fully be reintegrated into their communities”.

In addition to cultural attitudes, legal barriers are also common. Widows in Africa often face legal obstacles when attempting to access their property rights, healthcare, and other essential resources. The legal system may be slow, corrupt, or biased against women, making it challenging for widows to assert their rights and obtain the necessary support (Kimeu, 2022). Addressing these legal barriers requires reforms in legislation, judiciary practices, and the promotion of gender equality (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

Due to the developing nature of African societies, lack of resources plays a significant role. The lack of financial, social, and institutional resources exacerbates the challenges faced by widows in Africa. Poverty, limited access to education, and inadequate

healthcare services hinder their ability to overcome the obstacles associated with widowhood. Interventions should aim to provide widows with economic empowerment, education opportunities, and improved access to healthcare services (Van De Walle, 2018).

Majorly a compounding factor to other challenges relates to limited knowledge and awareness. Widows in Africa often lack awareness of their legal rights and the resources available to them. This lack of knowledge hampers their ability to advocate for themselves and seek appropriate support. Effective interventions should include awareness campaigns and educational programmes to empower widows with the knowledge and skills needed to navigate their challenges (Ngoveni, 2021).

A cardinal challenge difficult to deal with is the complex interplay of issues. Those who attempt to intervene such as the non-governmental sector find complex issues. The challenges faced by widows in Africa are multifaceted and interconnected. Poverty, lack of education, social stigma, and other factors intertwine, exacerbating the difficulties widows encounter. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive approaches that tackle various issues simultaneously. Interventions should adopt a holistic perspective, acknowledging the complex interplay of factors and implementing integrated strategies (Ngoven, 2021; Dube, 2022).

Theme 5: Challenges experienced by widows in Africa

Widowhood in African countries poses significant challenges across various aspects of well-being, including mental health, physical health, financial health, and social health. This article explores these challenges and their impact on widows in African societies. By shedding light on these issues, it becomes evident that comprehensive support systems and interventions are crucial to improving the lives of widows in Africa.

Research has revealed that mental health issues are common among the challenges faced by African widows. The loss of a spouse can be a traumatic experience for widows, leading to a range of mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and grief. Furthermore, the stigma and discrimination commonly associated with widowhood can worsen these problems by isolating widows and inhibiting their ability to seek help (Dube, 2022; Craig, Rochat, Naicker, Mapanga, Mtintsilana, Dlamini, Ware, Du Toit, Draper, Ritcher & Norris, 2022). This implies that culturally sensitive mental health services, awareness campaigns, and community support systems are essential to address the mental health challenges faced by widows in Africa.

Additionally, widows in African countries often encounter limited access to healthcare, resulting in untreated illnesses and chronic health conditions. In South Africa, in a study of the prevalence of probable depression and anxiety in relation to socio-demographics, Craig et al, (2022 p.10) found that depression was prevalent among widowed women and the record that *“both probable depression and probable anxiety were significantly higher among respondents who reported being widowed....”* Further, the burden of sole responsibility for themselves and their children can take a toll on their physical well-being. The lack of resources and societal support further exacerbates the challenges faced by widows in maintaining their physical health (Craig et al., 2022). There is a clear need for interventionists to focus efforts on improving healthcare accessibility, providing health education, and promoting holistic well-being for widows.

An overwhelming issue for widows in Africa is the question of financial health. Widows in Africa frequently experience poverty and financial insecurity, which significantly impacts their overall well-being (Dube, 2022). The lack of financial resources makes it challenging for widows to access adequate healthcare, nutrition, and other basic necessities. Consequently, this can result in malnutrition, poor health outcomes, and increased vulnerability to various illnesses and diseases (Nkechi & Anthonia, 2016). This implies that sincere economic empowerment initiatives, vocational training, and social safety nets can help alleviate financial hardships faced by widows, promoting their overall health and stability.

A human being is a social being and with limited social health, a human being feels isolated. Widows experience ill-social health in African communities with social isolation and exclusion rampant in the African communities (Dube, 2022). The loss of their spouse may lead to diminished social networks, leaving them without vital sources of support and connection. Additionally, widows may be at a heightened risk of domestic violence, sexual exploitation, and other forms of abuse, further jeopardising their social well-being (Mazurana, Parpart, & Raven-Roberts, 2020). Drawing from this analysis, the implications are that comprehensive interventions need to address social isolation, promote social inclusion, and provide protection and support services to safeguard the rights and dignity of widows.

Limitations of literature review

This study follows a literature review methodology and as such is not immune to limitations related to literature review studies. Following a thematic literature review requires the research to be subjective in choosing the studies to be included in the literature review. This is devoid of objectivity and is bound to have researcher bias which has also created difficulty in replicating thematic literature review studies (Haddaway et al., 2020). Further, the research found that whilst thematic literature review research is critically important when correctly done, there can be a lack of consistency and coherence in developing themes from the research data (Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017).

Policy implications and recommendations for addressing the challenges faced by widows in Africa

Addressing the challenges faced by widows in Africa requires a multi-faceted and comprehensive approach that addresses the root causes of widowhood and empowers widows to assert their rights and access resources (United Nations Human Rights, 2014) Women, 2018). Some typical strategies the African countries may adopt are discussed in the preceding sections of this paper.

In lieu of widows' problems in Africa, it may be useful if African countries enact and enforce laws that protect the rights of widows (Bond, 2019). Countries can pass and enforce laws that protect widows' rights to property, inheritance, and other resources. This can help to prevent exploitation and mistreatment and ensure that widows have access to the resources they need to support themselves and their families (Dube, 2022).

African countries can also raise widowhood awareness and change practices and cultural attitudes towards widows. Countries can work to raise awareness about the challenges faced by widows and change cultural attitudes and practices that stigmatize and exclude them. This can involve targeted public education campaigns, media outreach, and engaging with local leaders and community members to promote more inclusive and supportive attitudes (Adekile, 2013; Pemunta & Alubafi, 2016).

There is a need for humanitarian bodies such as the United Nations, (UN), and the African Union, (AU), to enact policies that address conflicts and displacement of widows in Africa. Countries affected by conflict and displacement can work to address the root causes of these crises and provide support to widows and other vulnerable populations. This can involve promoting peacebuilding efforts, providing humanitarian assistance, and supporting the resettlement and reintegration of displaced populations (Klugman, 2021).

Where various government policies fail to provide essential services to the widows, the NGO sector and other humanitarian agencies in Africa can provide significant help through psychosocial support. Psychosocial support is a special need that is rarely provided to widows in Africa. Widows in Africa may suffer from mental health problems such as depression and anxiety due to the loss of their spouse and the challenges they face. Providing psychosocial support through counselling services, support groups, and other interventions can help to address these challenges (Sekgobela, Peu, & van der Wath, 2020).

Conclusions

The study draws significant conclusions about the challenges experienced by widows in the African context. Despite the widespread nature of the problems, this paper summarises the findings in the conclusions drawn below.

In lieu of the findings, widowhood is a unique problem in Africa due to complexities of cultural, social, economic, and political factors. There are challenges of property disinheritance, social stigma isolation, and harmful traditional practices.

The study also concludes that different countries across the African continent have different practices that expose widows to challenging circumstances. These problems are embedded within culturally diverse populations and cultural diversities making efforts for interventions significantly difficult from one society to the other.

Despite the complexity of the problems faced by widows in African communities, the study concludes that interventions require comprehensive and coordinated efforts to intervene effectively. This entails addressing legal protections, social support, economic empowerment, cultural attitudes, and beliefs. By acknowledging and addressing the specific challenges widows face, societies can create a supportive environment that promotes their overall well-being. Implementing multifaceted interventions, such as legal reforms, economic empowerment, awareness campaigns, and resource provision, is crucial to overcoming barriers and creating a more inclusive and equitable society for widows in Africa. By working collaboratively, African countries can promote gender equality, reduce poverty, and improve the lives of widows.

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