

Effect of Widowhood on Economic and Social Wellbeing of Widows in Kisumu East Sub County, Kisumu County, Kenya

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Abstract

The death of a husband is one of the most traumatic experiences that is accompanied by additional social and economic responsibilities. Worldwide, the rate of widowhood is on the rise and it comes with multiple social and economic roles. In Kenya, more specifically, Kisumu County, there is an alarming increase in the number of widows who have to contend with the additional social and economic burden due to spousal loss. The current study sought to assess the effect of widowhood on economic and social wellbeing of widows in Kisumu East Sub County, Kisumu County, Kenya. The study used purposive sampling to select 50 widows in Kisumu East Sub County. The research design used was quantitative and qualitative in nature. Data was gathered using questionnaires and focus group discussions. The researcher had 5 focus group discussions with the widows to extract in depth information on widows' economic and social wellbeing. The findings report that widowhood, heightens social and economic challenges thus affecting the wellbeing of widows. The findings also show that widows in Kisumu East Sub County, Kisumu County, have social and economic hardships that impact on their lives. The study recommends that the government and the community should empower widows economically to help them initiate sustainable income generating projects, business and acquisition of new skills which may allow them to seek better medical care for themselves and their families. Additionally, the community and the government, should nurture and inculcate positive guidelines on social inclusivity of widows. Moreover, widows should also be sensitized on healthy ways of socially and economically integrating themselves in the society by establishing productive and sustainable social and financial welfare groups.

Keywords: widowhood, social, economic wellbeing

1. Introduction

According to Atindanbila, Bamford, Adatar, Nuako and Benneh, (2014) widows who are tender in age go through the roughest journey

economically as compared to widows who are more mature in age. However, the same study shows that both the younger and older widows suffer the same social effect of widowhood.

Studies reveal that the death of a life partner comes with a significant loss of family income, abandonment of the widows and orphans, over dependence on financial support from other men and increased educational dropouts among the orphaned, moreso when the spouse and father was the key economic provider. Consequently, causing unbearable burden on the widows coping resources. (Ogweno, 2010; Mburugu, 2020).

Moreover, Angel, Jiménez and Angel (2007) in their comparative study in preretirement and post retirement widows of Black, Hispanic, and non-Hispanic White women show that widowhood, significantly reduces the family income and the total asset value regardless of race, with a majority of widows affected by poverty post retirement since they were already surviving on lower income.

Research findings postulate that compared to widowers, widows suffer a huge financial and social constraints following a spousal loss. Additionally, these studies asserts that there is similarity on the effect of widowhood on social and economic wellbeing of younger and older widows (Ahmadi & Sadeghi, 2016; Mburugu, 2020; Dabergott, 2022).

Studies present different findings on the economic effect of widowhood. Findings by Weir, Willis and Sevak (2002) indicate that widowhood is a determinant factor to a life of lack and impoverishment among the widows. Worse still, the study reveals that younger widows have far reaching economic hardships than their older counterparts. Contrastingly, Ogweno's (2010) study among widows and widowers opines that both widows and widowers go through similar but serious financial challenges. However, Bengtsson, Dribe, and Helgertz (2017) reveals that in families where the husband was in charge of economic resources, the remaining spouse goes through serious financial stress after the death of their partner. Therefore, widowhood heightens economic turmoil which may be harmful to the widow's wellbeing.

Sasson and Umberson, (2014) explains the association between widowhood and intense economic burden and point out that economic burden may lead to severe emotional distress among widows. Where the husband was the financial pillar, the wife is now deprived of all the support they had received from the late

spouse. Additionally, Chima, (2006) opine that mostly widows go through a lot of financial hardships after the death of their husbands as they find financial management challenging. It is evident that management of finances among widows during and after the grief period is not easy for young and old widows. Widows with little financial education will find it an overwhelming experience thus creating fear when it comes to making major financial decisions (Mburugu, 2020).

According to Aroogh and Shahboulaghi, (2020) social support networks help widows to manage the stress of solitude and loneliness that comes with widowhood. The study further asserts that widows with strong social bonds are socially and more emotionally stable with a balanced self esteem compared to those who face rejection and abandonment. Comparatively, Alberts, Archie, Gesquiere, Altmann, Vaupel and Christensen, (2014) reveal that spousal death is not only a life event characterized by grief sorrow and hopelessness but also a period of abrupt change in the widow's social status and life in general. This is due to the fact that the living partner losses a friend and a lover and have to learn to cope without the spouse.

A study by Kamunyu, and Makena (2020) report that widowhood is characterized by intense isolation and loneliness. Consequently, widowed persons have to contend with lack of intimacy and loneliness. Many widows stay alone and suffer from lack of social interaction as they have to redefine relationships afresh. This social neglect can however be detrimental to the widow's wellbeing. Moreover, Olum (2014) opines that before spousal loss, the couple depend on one another for social support. Unfortunately, a woman who has lost the husband must learn to adapt to their widowhood status.

Mburugu, Nyaga, Chepchieng and Ngar (2015) study show that widows go through social stigma and discrimination from relatives, friends and family. The study additionally reports that many widow suffer from lack of social support from in-laws. The death of a husband may negatively impact on the social welfare of the surviving spouse as they go through the grieving process. Studies opine that widows may suffer from total exclusion from societal and family activities given their new status. Similarly, Akinlabi (2013) indicate that widowed women are affected by social stigma

from relatives and friends. Therefore, the current study sought to assess the effect of widowhood on economic and social wellbeing of widows in Kisumu East Sub County, Kisumu County, Kenya

2. Research Methodology

The research design of the study was both quantitative and qualitative in nature. The population under study were widows in Kisumu East Sub County, Kisumu County, Kenya. Purposive sampling was used to select 50 widows in Kisumu East Sub County. Questionnaires and focus group discussion were used in the acquisition of data. Five focus group discussions were carried out to seek the widow's opinion on their social and economic wellbeing. During the focus group discussions, the

researcher had an enriching active interaction with the respondents which helped in gaining more insight on the social and economic plight of the widows. Analysis of data was done using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. Reliability and validity tests of the instruments was done to confirm the degree to which the test items measured the characteristics for which they were formulated.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Responses on Economic Wellbeing of Widows

The information in Table 1 shows the respondents opinion on their economic wellbeing. From the results presented on this table, it is clearly evident that most widows are burdened economically and therefore found it difficult to cope with such hardships.

Table 1. Responses on Economic Wellbeing of Widows

Economic Wellbeing	Most difficult	More difficult	Difficult	Not difficult
	4	3	2	1
Basic utilities (Food, clothes, lighting & water)	20(40%)	27(54%)	2(4%)	1(2%)
Rent/Housing	35(70%)	10(20%)	1(2%)	4(8%)
School fees	40(80%)	8(16%)	1(2%)	1(2%)
Medical care/cover	12(24%)	30(60%)	6(12%)	2(4%)
Investment plan	37(74%)	10(20%)	2(4%)	1(2%)
Property Inheritance	10(20%)	33(66%)	2(4%)	5(10%)

The results in Table 1 shows that while 40% of the respondents agreed that they found it most difficult to provide basic utilities (food, clothes, lighting & water) nearly half of them 27(54%) found it more difficult to provide basic utilities. Comparatively, results from the focus group discussion with the widows show that the widows had a challenge providing basic utilities because in most cases the deceased husbands had an upper hand in the provision of those needs to the family. "After the death of my husband, life became financially unbearable since my spouse was the sole breadwinner. My world had fallen apart and confusion and fear dominated my life as I had no solution on how to take care of my young family". Similarly, previous research studies also agree that widowhood heightens economic turmoil which may be harmful to the widow's wellbeing (Bengtsson, Dribe, & Helgertz, 2017; Dabergott,

2022).

However, most widows 35(70%) expressed that they found it most difficult to raise money for rent/housing. Contrastingly, only 4(8%) were able to navigate rent/housing without much difficulty. Moreover, the information in Table 1, indicates that 40(80%) of the respondents found it most difficult to pay school fees with only 2(4%) who found it easy to raise school fees. From the focus group discussion, widows opined that that it was not easy raising school fees for their children as they now had an added responsibility with little income. One of the respondents explained that "I had to do a lot of odd jobs to help in raising school fees for my two children. Unfortunately, the meagre income I got from these jobs was never enough to meet my children's school requirements and they were constantly sent home due to the huge fees arrears". Similarly, research studies by Ogwen

(2010) and Mburugu (2020) explain that the death of a life partner comes with a significant loss of family income, abandonment of the widows and orphans, over dependence on financial support from other men and increased educational dropouts among the orphaned, moreso when the spouse and father was the key economic provider.

Whereas, 30(60%) of the widows found it more difficult to have adequate medical care/cover for themselves and their families only 2(4%) were able to access proper medical care/ cover. The findings from the focus discussion group also report that the respondents had a problem with medical bills. A participant opined that "From time to time, I could only purchase over the counter drugs from self prescriptions since I could not afford the doctors' fees or be able to obtain a medical cover for me and my children".

Findings presented in Table 1 also reports that 37(74%) of the widows agreed that it was most

difficult from them to have an investment plan. A respondent reported that "Since we lived from hand to mouth an investment plan was something elusive that would never be realized". Additionally, the widows agreed that 33(66%) of them found it more difficult to deal with inheritance of property compared to only 5(10%) who navigated property inheritance with no challenges. On the same note, Sasson and Umberson, (2014) opines that widowhood contributes to intense economic burden which may lead to severe emotional distress among widows. Moreover, where the husband was the financial pillar, the wife is deprived of all the support they had received from the deceased.

3.2 Social Wellbeing of Widows

The findings on Table 2 shows the respondents social wellbeing. The data on this table indicates that most of the widows presented social challenges that were not easy to manage as they adjusted to their new social status.

Table 2. Social Wellbeing of Widows

Social Wellbeing of widows	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
	4	3	2	1
Lack of Social support network	17(34%)	10(20%)	16(32%)	7(14%)
Loneliness/Solitude	35(70 %)	10(20%)	3(6%)	2(4%)
Loss of Social Status	30(60%)	16(32%)	2(4%)	2(4%)
Discrimination from family friends and relatives	20(40%)	14(28%)	11(22%)	5(10%)
Lack of social support from in-laws	38(76%)	9(18%)	2(4%)	1(2%)
Social Stigma from community	15(30%)	29(58%)	5(10%)	1(2%)
Exclusion from public gathering/activities	14(28%)	18(36%)	16(32%)	2(4%)

According to the results in Table 2, 17(34%) of the respondents were of the opinion that they lacked social support networks compared to 7(14%) who had no problem with social support networks. From the focus group discussion, the widows opined that they had little time for social interaction as they had to focus more on family responsibilities. They reported that increased family demands denied them the chance socialize as before.

Moreover, 35(70%) of the widows agreed that they faced loneliness and solitude since they were widowed. Comparatively, findings by several research studies agree that widows bear the burden of extreme isolation, lack of intimacy

and loneliness after spousal death (Olum, 2014; Kamunyu & Makena, 2020). The results presented on Table 2 also indicates loss of social status for most of the widows. The data shows that 30(60%) of the widows strongly agreed that they had lost their social status after the death of their spouses.

However, 20(40%) of the widows strongly agreed that they battled with discrimination from family friends and relatives. The information availed from the focus discussion groups revealed that most widows were segregated not only by family and relatives but also by friends. They asserted that friends and family alike did not involve them in social

activities and in case they attended such functions, they were treated with a lot of suspicion and were constantly labelled as “husband snatcher” and “Mkono Mmoja” (one handed woman) by their married counterparts. One of the widows during the focus discussion groups bemoaned that “one thing that those who still have their spouses forget is that no husband/wife is permanent and it is not our fault that we are widows. We therefore need to be treated fairly and not as the scam of the world.” This is in agreement with Mburugu et al (2015) who assert that widows go through social stigma and discrimination from relatives, friends and family.

Additionally, 38(76%) of the respondents strongly agreed that they lacked social support from in-laws. Comparatively, findings from the focus group discussion has revealed that most widows face rejection and inadequate support from in-laws due to property inheritance battles, jealousy and the low opinion that the society has about widows in regards to land/property inheritance of the deceased husband of whom the in laws feel the widow is not entitled to. It is also evident that 29(58%) of the respondents were in agreement that they battled social stigma from the community. The focus group discussion reveals that the community did not give much recognition to widows and as such were named “Mond liete” (the wives of the grave) a term denying widows their rightful place in the society. However, 18(36%) of the respondents were of the opinion that faced exclusion from public gathering and activities due to their new widowhood status.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

In summary the findings of the present study indicate that Widowhood impacts negatively on social and economic wellbeing of widows. This study also reveals that widows in Kisumu East Sub County, Kisumu County, have economic and social challenges that impact on their lives and general wellbeing. The proposed study recommendations are that the government and the community should empower widows economically to help them initiate sustainable income generating projects, businesses and acquisition of new skills which may allow them seek better medical care for themselves and their families. Secondly, the community and the government, should nurture and inculcate positive guidelines on social inclusivity of widows. Moreover, widows should also be

sensitized on healthy ways of socially and economically integrating themselves in the society by establishing productive and sustainable social and financial welfare groups.

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