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VOICES SILENCED: THE EFFECTS OF CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS NORMS ON SOUTH AFRICAN WIDOWS

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we use feminist theory to examine how cultural and religious norms are misused to sustain oppression in South Africa. The qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with widows, their relatives, religious and community leaders, document analysis, and roundtable discussions. This paper investigates the unfair treatment widows face after their husbands' death. Cultural and religious practices often place widows in unfavourable positions, thus supporting gender-based discrimination and silencing their voices. This study closely explores how families exploit these norms to oppress widows, thereby maintaining their marginalisation. The findings reveal that widows face various unfair and oppressive practices, from asset dispossession to social isolation. All of these are justified under the guise of cultural and religious traditions. These practices not only undermine widows' constitutional rights but also hinder their ability to cope with grief and rebuild their lives. The analysis underscores the intersection of gender, culture and religion, demonstrating how these factors collectively contribute to systemic oppression of widows in South Africa. The study concludes by recommending strategies to empower widows, including policy reforms, social support networks, engagement from community leaders and advocacy groups, aimed at supporting widows and addressing the root causes of their oppression to foster a more equitable society for all. This research seeks to challenge oppressive norms and promote gender equality by amplifying the voices of widows and advocating for their rights.

Keywords: Widowhood, South African widows, cultural practices, religion, loss, grief

INTRODUCTION

Widows in South Africa and across the globe encounter serious problems that are challenges imposed by the communities in which they live. These issues stem from cultural misuse, religious bias, patriarchy and prevailing myths and often jeopardise the widows' financial stability and mental well-being after the death of a spouse, as Ude and Njoku (2017) argue that spousal loss increases the risk of mental health issues. Additionally, widows are frequently exploited during this vulnerable period, with individuals taking advantage of their distress to dispossess them of assets and their deceased partners' belongings.

Mourning the deceased is a universal practice (Khosa-Nkatini, 2022), however, its customs vary significantly across nations and ethnic groups (Dube, 2023; Shoko & Danke, 2024). A concerning aspect of widowhood is how the widow's grief is publicly performed, with her body becoming both the object and subject of mourning rituals (Ramphele, 1996; Khosa-Nkatini, 2022). Ramphele (1996) contends that widowhood in South Africa exemplifies gender inequity and the systemic oppression of women. She highlights that, unlike widows, widowers are encouraged to suppress their grief and their mourning is minimally marked, often limited to shaving their hair. In contrast, widows are expected to engage in visible, often degrading mourning practices (Ramphele, 1996; Khosa-Nkatini, 2022; Dube, 2023; Shoko & Danke, 2024a).

Despite growing international attention on widowhood (Dube, 2023), African widows remain overlooked, mainly in commissioned research and policy interventions. Manala (2015) argues that scholarly discourse has not adequately addressed the neglect and mistreatment of widows, nor has it sufficiently examined the impact of widowhood rites in South Africa. Similarly, Amaechi (2022) asserts that widowhood practices in various African communities have inflicted lasting trauma on widows. This study seeks to address these gaps by exploring the religious and cultural norms that silence women during the widowhood process.

This study examines how cultural and religious practices are usually used to oppress widows in South Africa through the lens of the feminist perspective. Their oppression ranges from symbolic acts such as being required to wear a mourning garment (*inzilo*) for at least a year to more severe injustices, including the loss of their deceased spouse's assets to in-laws. The study closely assesses the role of traditional and faith-based leaders in either supporting widows or perpetuating their oppression. It highlights the urgent need for legal and social protections for widows to advance gender equality. The study further suggests ways to safeguard widows' rights and offers recommendations for young couples on estate planning to mitigate financial and emotional distress following spousal loss. This study attempts to make a significant contribution to the limited scholarship on widowhood in South Africa. It does so by foregrounding the lived experiences of widows in South Africa. Situating these experiences within a feminist perspective, the study seeks to extend the understanding of gendered loss and resilience of widows from diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds and to conscientize society about the challenges the social injustices and marginalisation widows are often subjected to. This approach helps bridge the gap between theory and practice, as it offers insights that can inform research and community-based initiatives aimed at promoting the dignity, empowerment and social inclusion of widows, regardless of their socio-economic status.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts feminist theory as its theoretical framework, drawing on critical theory to explore the dynamics of oppression, power relations and gendered inequalities that significantly affect women. Gasztold (2020) asserts that feminism is grounded in the belief in gender equality, striving to enhance the social standing of women by challenging discriminatory assumptions and bias. This oppression is evident across various domains of life, religious institutions, community leadership, politics, labour participation and even within family structures. Feminism interrogates the systemic disempowerment of women, rejecting gender-based inequalities and working to empower women in the face of entrenched societal norms (Gasztold, 2020). This study seeks to challenge the inhumane practices inflicted upon women under the guise of culture and religion, particularly within the context of widowhood in South Africa.

As Sharma (2022) points out, feminist theory has consistently highlighted the gendered nature of social relations that permeate both the private and public spheres. Patriarchy has long privileged men at the expense of women, with this dynamic shaping the lived experiences of widows in South Africa. While these discussions have taken various forms across different intellectual and geographical contexts, they resonate deeply with the realities of widowhood, where gender, patriarchy and cultural norms heavily influence how widows are treated.

Harding (1998) advocates for men to challenge hegemonic ideologies and actively contribute to feminist discourse. Watkins (2015) critiques the gendered division of labour, particularly the burden placed on women in domestic care roles. Black feminists assert that feminism must engage with and challenge the patriarchal structures that oppress marginalised communities while promoting coalition-building to address the unique challenges faced by women of colour (Simien, 2004). This study draws on these feminist principles to explore how culture and religion are used to silence black widows in South Africa, mainly through patriarchal control exerted by their late husbands' families.

Feminist theory serves as a platform for liberation, aiming to challenge the unjust conditions women face, especially in times of grief and mourning. Through the feminist lens, the study highlights how patriarchal cultural norms subject widows to inequality and silence, perpetuating their social marginalisation. Widows are often subjected to practices that reinforce their vulnerability, while widowers are spared from similar repression. This imbalance highlights the injustice inherent in cultural and religious customs that serve to oppress women during an already challenging time instead of providing support. Black feminism aims to address the intersectional issues faced by black women, advocating for liberation and justice for women and all marginalised groups. This framework helps in understanding and challenging the systemic and cultural forces that sustain the oppression of black widows in South Africa and beyond. Ultimately, this theory provides tools to critically analyse these practices and strive for a more equitable and just society for women, particularly those navigating the complexities of widowhood.

LITERATURE REVIEW

CONCEPTUALISING WIDOWHOOD

The concept *widowhood* has different definitions. Perrig-Chiello (2022) defines widowhood as an event resulting from the disruption caused by death, leading to a change in the marital status of the bereaved individual to unmarried or single. Conversely, some studies conceptualise widowhood as a social status or stage in life marked by the loss of a spouse through death (Shoko & Danke, 2024a). Others describe widowhood as the condition of being a widow or widower (Ladapo & Akinsola, 2023). Defining widowhood as an event implies that it occurs within a specific time and place and may be perceived as a finite occurrence. In contrast, viewing widowhood as a state implies a more enduring or permanent condition. However, understanding widowhood as a transitory phase, with its duration determined by the bereaved, shifts the scholarly and general discourse to a new perspective, providing a more nuanced lens through which issues of widowhood, particularly in relation to religion and culture, can be explored. Widowhood remains an inevitable reality as long as birth and death continue to occur. Widows exist in every community, but in Africa, the experience of widowhood is often fraught with fear and dread for women. Widows in African contexts face many hardships stemming from societal pressures, the husband's family, traditions and even other women within their communities (Akujobi, 2009). In Sub-Saharan Africa and other regions, widowhood is recognised as a significant social issue that warrants urgent attention (Ude & Njoku, 2017). This urgency arises from the understanding that widowhood practices are deeply rooted in and perpetuated by culture and religion and are regarded with reverence and sacredness in many African societies. These practices exert both positive and negative impacts on widows, with the challenges often overshadowing the benefits in contexts where cultural and religious norms dominate the discourse on widowhood.

WIDOWHOOD RITES AND PRACTICES

When widows lose their husbands, society often expects, instructs, or coerces them to perform certain cultural rites. These practices, known as widowhood rites, encompass all the processes and rituals that widows undergo, supposedly to *cleanse* them and formally acknowledge their new status (Shoko & Danke, 2024a). The specifics of these rites vary widely across cultures, religions, and geographical regions. In most African countries, including South Africa, Nigeria, Zambia, Kenya and Zimbabwe, these rites include isolating to a room with only a mattress and a blanket, engaging in sexual intercourse with a male relative to cleanse the deceased husband's spirit and forced to marry a male relative to keep the wealth of the deceased husband within the family name (Dube, 2023). In addition to these, South African widows have been exposed to wearing black garments for a certain period of time, limitation of their movements and sitting, cutting their hair, sitting on the floor for ten or more days, elders inserting pumpkin seeds into their ears, ashes from the steaming smeared on small razor-cut incisions on their body, the use of cold water baths for a certain period of time, food restrictions, the use of specific utensils (Manala, 2015; Shoko & Danke, 2024a). These practices perpetuate stigma, myths and stereotypes about widows. Ewelukwa (2002) argues that African women are victims of longstanding myths and ideologies designed to keep them subordinated. Upon becoming widowed, these myths are reinforced and integrated into the rites they are compelled to undergo. For instance, Fiasorgbor (2018) highlights myths that prohibit married women from mingling with widows out of fear that their husbands will also die. Shoko and Danke (2024a) describe a case where passengers in a taxi refused to touch a widow's fare.

During the mourning period, the widow is subjected to numerous restrictions. She must stay at home, abstain from sexual relationships and refrain from participating in social or public gatherings until cleansing rituals are performed. These practices underscore the communal expectations placed upon widows, reflecting cultural reverence for the mourning process and the social isolation often experienced during this time (Tshaka, Tanga, & Ntshongwana, 2023).

Even after purification, the widow must abide by specific rules, such as avoiding overnight stays outside her residential area. These rituals highlight the deep-seated cultural beliefs around widowhood rites, raising questions about their perceived benefits and disadvantages. While such practices may offer cultural and spiritual significance, they also reinforce the widow's isolation and societal marginalisation (Manala, 2015).

Scholarship indicates that widowhood rites have profound psychological (Nakagomi, Shiba, Kondo, & Kawachi, 2021; Wang, Smith-Greenaway, Bauldry, Margolis, & Verdery, 2022; Adena, Hamermesh, Myck, & Oczkowska, 2023) and financial effects (Biever, Patel, Agnew, Kopp, Krausman, & McCoy, 2021; Chami & Pooley, 2023; Freak-Poli, Kung, Ryan, & Shields, 2022). Moreover, widows often experience abandonment by friends and family and endure harsh remarks (Samodien & Al-Sowaidi, 2022). While widowhood rites are prevalent in many African countries, Shoko and Danke (2024a) highlight a significant lack of studies on these practices, particularly those involving violent elements. Violence within widowhood rites is often characterised by unfair treatment, fear and stigmatisation. Similarly, Manala (2015) observes that the implications of these rites for African widows remain insufficiently addressed in contemporary scholarship despite the global prevalence of widowhood.

In other countries, such as Malaysia, Karupiah (2022) reports that although widows did not encounter exclusion from everyday activities, they were excluded from activities that were considered to be full of opportunities. The exclusion did not only come from society, but it also emerged from these widows due to self-stigma. Malaysian Indian widows are coerced into removing their *thali* (necklace worn by married women*), pottu* (a coloured dot painted on the married woman's forehead) and stop wearing flowers on their head as these are believed to be worn by married women whose husbands are still alive. In India, Sahoo and Acharya (2024) pointed out that most widows in India are excluded from social interaction in both private and public spaces and are exposed to various restrictions relating to what they eat, the way they conduct themselves, their attire and ornaments, yet widowhood is rarely researched. Despite geographical differences, there are widowhood practices and rites that are similar across various cultures and religious obligations.

While some studies, such as Ifeanacho (2023), suggest that certain widowhood rites are reasonable, it is essential to interrogate the inhumane and dehumanising aspects legitimised by these practices. Nyangweso (2017) emphasises that moral principles must guide indigenous practices, including widowhood rites. Before being labelled as widows, these women were, first and foremost, human beings. Recognising their humanity can encourage those who enforce and participate in widowhood rites to adopt a more compassionate approach.

Despite the atrocities evident in widowhood practices and rites, Ifeanacho (2023) argues that widowhood rites have positive aspects, contending that they were initially designed to support widows' well-being rather than subject them to harm. Perceived benefits include providing comfort and therapeutic processes to help widows move forward with their lives (Manala, 2015). However, numerous studies reveal that the injustices and oppressive practices embedded in widowhood rites far outweigh these benefits. Ladapo and Akinsola (2023) assert that widowhood rites often violate the fundamental rights of widows. Adding context, Fasanmi and Ayivor (2021), along with Amoo, Adekola, Adesina, Adekeye, Onayemi and Gberevbie (2022), document how widows are subjected to coercion, oppression, marginalisation and harmful practices as part of these rites.

WIDOWHOOD AND RELIGION

Although widowhood rites and related practices are socially constructed, institutional systems often sustain their reinforcement, particularly religion and religious organisations. Religion, as a system and churches, as institutions, play a central role in ensuring that widowhood practices are upheld. Many of the practices imposed on widows are supported, either explicitly or

implicitly, by their religious affiliations. Manala (2015) asserts that African Christians are heavily influenced by widowhood rites that frequently oppress and violate the human rights of widows. While some churches openly reject and disassociate themselves from widowhood practices, a significant number of churches in South Africa actively participate in and perpetuate these rites. Shoko and Danke (2024a) argue that religion often prescribes specific ways in which widows are expected to dress and behave, thereby reinforcing gender norms. This intertwining of gender and widowhood practices raises critical questions about the unequal treatment of widows compared to widowers. Widowers are rarely subjected to the same level of scrutiny or the same rights as widows, which leads to the argument that widowhood practices may be deliberately punitive towards women. While the justification for this disparity remains unclear, the differential treatment suggests an inherent bias in widowhood practices. Although this argument may seem to lean towards extreme conclusions, it is rooted in the understanding that both widows and widowers experience profound grief upon losing their loved ones, yet their societal treatment diverges significantly.

The correlation between religion and widowhood in South Africa is further evidenced by practices observed by Shoko and Danke (2024a), who report that certain religious traditions prohibit widows from raising their hands in church or mandate that they sit at the back. Despite enduring such differential and often degrading treatment compared to their status before widowhood, many widows continue to view churches as spaces of healing. Shoko and Danke (2024a), along with Matlabe-Danke, Ngulube, Shandu and Shoko (2024), note that widows often show respect for and adhere to the directives of these religious institutions, even when such practices violate their human rights and dignity, under the guise of religious or cultural observance.

The paradox of women's oppression in churches is especially disturbing and unjustifiable when viewed along with the biblical doctrines that advocate for the protection of widows. In African contexts, Fasanmi and Ayivor (2021) identify Islam, Christianity and traditional religions as key participants in widowhood rites. Milazzo and van de Walle (2021) claim that in Nigeria, Muslim widows experience less violence than Christian widows because the Islamic inheritance law emphasises the protection of widows, while the customary family law inadequately safeguards the interests of Christian widows. Contrary to this, Manala (2015) and Nyangweso (2017) cite numerous biblical scriptures that support the care and protection of widows, emphasising that the mistreatment of widows in religious spaces such as Christian churches often reflects the attitudes and actions of pastors and congregants rather than the teachings of the bible.

Despite the oppression often observed in religious spaces, spirituality continues to serve as a vital source of healing for many African widows. Fasanmi and Ayivor (2021) emphasise the pivotal role of spirituality in helping widows navigate their grief. Testoni, Antonellini, Ronconi, Biancalani and Neimeyer (2022) further argue that religion and churches provide spaces where spirituality enables widows to maintain meaningful bonds with supportive members of their communities. These spiritual connections often offer widows solace and a sense of belonging, even within contexts that simultaneously marginalise them.

WIDOWHOOD, CULTURE AND MISCONCEPTIONS

Socially and culturally, widows face significant challenges rooted in oppressive cultural practices that marginalise and stigmatise them. Social capital is identified as a critical resource for addressing these challenges (Dube, 2021). Culture, constructed and maintained through generational transmission, encompasses Indigenous and customary practices, as well as political, ideological and institutional structures (Nyangweso, 2017). It defines values, principles and directives for various social aspects, such as widowhood rites, which are legitimised through acceptance, constant practice and transmission. These rites are cultural norms legitimised by their perceived sacredness or naturalness.

In some cultures, widows are suspected of killing their husbands and their widowhood is observed through customs and rites. In African societies, whether a woman is blamed for her husband's death, widowhood customs, such as social surveillance, cleansing rituals, enforced dress codes and restricted movements, are common (Fasanmi & Ayivor, 2021; Mabunda & Ross, 2023). In Kenya, widow cleansing is justified by claiming that widows carry cultural impurities from their deceased husbands that must be removed (Fasanmi & Ayivor, 2021). Shaving a widow's hair in other African countries signifies severing ties with the late husband (Ifeanacho, 2023). Tsonga widows in South Africa comply with these rites out of fear of family retaliation if they resist (Khosi-Nkatini, 2020).

Hindu widows are stigmatised for failing to protect their husbands' lives. In contrast, Yoruba widows are subjected to practices such as cooking and eating with broken utensils, shaving their heads, and crying uncontrollably to display grief. These practices aim to sever the widow's ties to her deceased husband based on the belief that his spirit remains attached to her (Adeyemo, 2016; Brown, 2016). Despite these practices, widows are rarely consulted about the procedures of the rites and consent is seldom sought. Many widows are coerced into compliance with the belief that marrying into a family entails inheriting its cultural and religious norms.

MULTIFACETED CHALLENGES FACING WIDOWS IN UNDER-RESOURCED COMMUNITIES

Widows often face severe social burdens, marked by exclusion and stigma. Most widows report being treated as economic liabilities by in-laws and the broader community (Ndlovu, 2015). They are often considered burdensome due to assumptions that they will rely on others for financial or social support. Many are excluded from social networks, events and even saving schemes, which worsens their isolation and vulnerability (Freak-Poli, Kung, Ryan, & Shields, 2022). Limited support from in-laws compounds their challenges, leaving them dependent on their families of origin and often pushing them into economic and social isolation (Motsoeneng & Modise, 2020).

Consequently, loneliness and humiliation become a recurring theme in the experiences of widows. A substantial number of studies in Asian countries, such as China, document the loneliness of widows (see Yang and Gu, 2021; Yang, 2021). The death of a spouse often leaves widows socially isolated, with emotional pain exacerbated by cultural norms that restrict their participation in the community. Ritual practices and social expectations, such as wearing mourning clothes or undergoing degrading ceremonies add to their sense of humiliation and loss of dignity (Shoko & Danke, 2024a). According to Motsoeneng and Modise (2020), these customs intensify the emotional anguish of widows, leaving them marginalised and vulnerable.

The bereavement presents significant emotional challenges, with grief often oscillating between loss-oriented moments of mourning and restoration-oriented moments of adaptation. For instance, yearning, a typical response to grief, is evident in the first year of widowhood. Barros-Lane, Yang, Vollmann, Allen, Gilmore, Sanchez and Buckler (2024) observed that sexual deprivation also plays a key role in the grieving process, as widows experience a lack of physical intimacy and human contact, intensifying feelings of longing and isolation. Furthermore, the sexual needs of widows, especially young widows, are frequently disenfranchised, with societal norms often suppressing or stigmatising their sexual desires. In many cultures, widows face hostility from the community and family members alike when attempting to re-partner. As a result, their sexuality is marginalised through harmful practices and legal restrictions. These societal pressures not only exacerbate their emotional pain but also compromise their healing process, as they are unable to engage in restoration-oriented activities such as forming new romantic relationships (Barros-Lane et al., 2024)

In under-resourced and remote communities, widows face significant health, psychological, social and economic risks (Lloyd-Sherlock, Corso & Minicuci,2015). You, Wang, Xiao and Liu

(2022) pointed out that elderly Chinese widows in rural and remote areas often experience psychological and health issues. Similarly, in Sub-Saharan Africa, many widows suffer from socio-economic and psychological issues (Shoko & Matlabe-Danke, 2024b). Schmitz (2021) also reports that psychological issues such as depression are dominant in Southern Europe. These risks exacerbate the vulnerability of widows, compromising the possibility of living stable and fulfilling lives (Dube, 2021). The psychological impact of widowhood is deep, particularly in communities lacking mental health facilities and services. Widows often endure prolonged grief and psychological distress, compounded by environmental stressors that force them to relive their losses (Manala, 2015; Dube, 2021).

The economic risks faced by widows are equally severe, especially in African countries, as the death of their husbands often results in the loss of the primary source of income for the household. This challenge is particularly acute in communities where women are predominantly homemakers and lack access to employment opportunities that are functional and fulfilling (Dube, 2021). Contrary to this, European scholarship on widowhood indicates that while psychological issues feature mostly in widowhood, financial resources are not an issue (Schmitz, 2021), especially in countries such as Germany, Switzerland, Italy, France, Spain, Denmark, Belgium, Sweden, except in Austria, the Czech Republic and Poland (Kapelle & Van Winkle, 2024). Although this information is not surprising, considering that these countries are developed, have strong constitutions and have better gender equality policies than most Asian and African countries, it is worth highlighting that the socio-economic status of the widows from the third-world countries is worsened by their poor financial standing, compared to their European counterparts. Nonetheless, Dube (2021) suggests that to address these issues in those countries where widows face them, deliberate governmental intervention is required. It should be complemented by support from non-governmental organisations (NGOs). This approach should be research-driven and evidence-based to ensure the effective allocation of resources.

HISTORICAL AND STRUCTURAL OPPRESSION OF WOMEN

The road to gender equality for women in South Africa has been a long and complex journey. It requires the dismantling of structural barriers and addressing divisions based on race, class and gender (Veeran, 2006). South Africa's patriarchal, colonial and apartheid systems kept women marginalised, both in societal and marital matters. However, with the advent of democracy, women hoped for transformed positions in society. Segalo (2015) notes that recognising women as 'full citizens' marked a significant shift in post-apartheid South Africa, while women's groups continued their activism for equality (Veeran, 2006).

The intersection of apartheid, patriarchy, gender and widowhood highlights the ongoing struggles women face, especially in the aftermath of their husbands' deaths. Despite some changes since 1994, little has been done to address the trauma and oppression experienced by widows. Marital power in South Africa, historically dominated by husbands, persisted until 2021, when it formally ended after 68 years (Arekapudi & Martins, 2022). The trauma caused by apartheid and marital power has deeply affected women's lives.

International and regional conventions, such as CEDAW and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, have recognised the need for legal reform to advance gender equality (Rustin, 2021). South Africa's democratic constitution guarantees rights to equality and dignity, supported by legislation such as the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act and the Domestic Violence Act. Nevertheless, many women still face oppression from their husbands and communities. Segalo (2015) argues that women's emancipation cannot be fully achieved while gender inequality continues to render them invisible and trapped in a "crooked room" of injustice.

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Figure 1 below highlights the key discourses emerging from the scholarship on widowhood. In the diagram, the *historical and structural oppression of women's* discourse is presented at the bottom to show that most of the issues widows face are reflective of a historical and structural struggle that has existed for centuries. Despite the substantial scholarship on widowhood in many African countries, there remains a paucity of studies that explore the experiences of widows in South Africa. Opportunities to document widowhood practices and their implications are often overlooked. Okoro and Nkama (2018) argue that widowhood practices are often misrepresented, misunderstood, or dismissed in modern scholarship, leading to their vilification. These observations, however, cannot be directly interpolated to South Africa, where widowhood remains a marginal topic in academic discourse. In 2022, data indicated that 10.2% of South Africa's population is widowed, with 16% of that group being young adult women (Shoko & Danke, 2024a). However, there is little that is known about the experiences of these widows. The literature explored in this paper offers rich insights into issues related to widowhood, including widowhood rites, violence, culture, religion, and psychological and financial concerns. However, the use of cultural and religious norms to oppress South African women remains underexplored. Although these cultural and religious norms are often discussed, there is a need to investigate the oppression that is inflicted on South African widows by these norms. In addition, existing studies often employ the intersectionality framework (see Shoko & Danke, 2024a; Shoko & Matlabe-Danke, 2024b) to explore issues related to widowhood. However, there are very few studies that have attempted to explore South African widowhood issues through a feminist perspective. The widowhood scholarship is not only significant as a textual discourse, but it also provides a window through which the gaps in protecting the human rights and dignity of widows can be understood and addressed in South Africa and beyond.

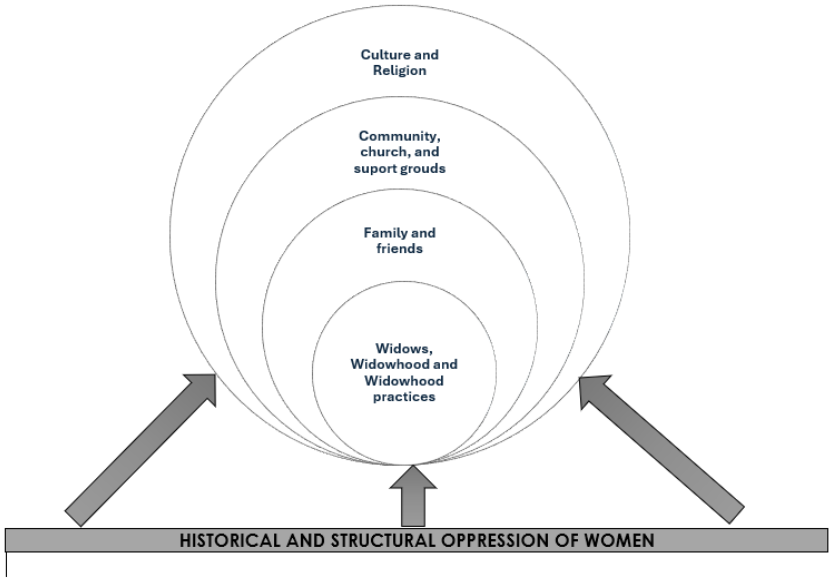


Figure 1: Discourses on Widowhood

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METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach, as described by Creswell (2011) and Denzin & Lincoln (2005), which is an effective method for investigating phenomena in their natural context. Qualitative research facilitates the exploration of the conditions that prompt specific behaviours and social issues (Akyıldız & Ahmed, 2021). The interpretivism paradigm is employed to interpret the different experiences that are shared by widows. As Alharahsheh and Pius (2020) observe, interpretivism enables researchers to connect various factors expressed by participants, thereby enhancing their understanding of the lived realities of these individuals. This approach is essential for understanding factors that silence widows' voices within the context of widowhood. Furthermore, a phenomenological research design is adopted, which, according to Sarfo, Debrah, Gbordzoe, Afful, and Obenget (2021), is fundamental in focusing on individuals' lived experiences. This methodology allows the study to examine how cultural and religious practices influence widows' lives following the loss of a spouse. By emphasising participants' interpretations, the research investigates their grieving processes and perceptions of their experiences (Neubauer et al., 2019). This approach offers particularly valuable insights into the unique challenges faced by Black South African women, providing a nuanced perspective on how cultural and religious practices can sometimes silence their voices.

DATA COLLECTION

SAMPLING

The study used purposive sampling to select the participants. Purposive sampling is used when the study assumes that there are specific types of people with specific experiences needed to achieve the specific aims and objectives of the research (Campbell, Greenwood, Prior, Shearer, Walkem, Young, & Walker, 2020). Thus, purposive sampling is suitable for this study because it enables the researcher to purposefully select individuals who are South Africans, widowed and have experienced widowhood.

PARTICIPANT'S PROFILE

The study included 13 widowed participants, ages 46 to 69. The key participants' details, including age, location, educational background, social class, years of marriage and marital property arrangements, were documented to enrich the context of the data analysis. Most participants were married in a community of property, with only two in customary marriage. Many have no professional educational qualifications, with only two holding post-matric qualifications. Out of the 13 participants, 10 identify as Christian, one as Muslim and two do not affiliate with any religion. All participants are from Gauteng province and represent diverse ethnic backgrounds. The study's 13 participants were members of the Widowhood Issues in South Africa (WISA) project, a community engagement research project designed to support widows through sharing experiences and empowerment initiatives. The participants, whose age range was 46 to 69, were informed about the availability and willingness to participate in the study. This project embodies the participatory and ethical foundations of engaged scholarship research, which prioritises trust, consent and the lived experiences of participants directly affected by the issues under investigation. While this sample size was relatively small, it enabled a rich and in-depth engagement with the participants within the WISA project, ensuring the depth of the study and providing nuanced insights into the experiences of widows across different age groups and socio-economic statuses in South Africa.

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SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

The primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which are defined as flexible and exploratory interviews. Semi-structured interviews are flexible in that they accommodate questions that emerge during the interview (Ruslin, Mashuri, Rasak, Alhabsyi, & Syam, 2022). Employed within the interpretivist paradigm and phenomenological design, semi-structured interviews enable participants to describe their experiences of widowhood in depth, capturing the nuances in their interpretations of mourning, family relationships and cultural and religious expectations (Creswell, 2009). The semi-structured format comprehensively explored themes such as death, mourning and post-loss family dynamics. The semi-structured interviews used a flexible guide that included open-ended prompts, such as "Tell us about your husband before he passed away" and "How did your family/church/colleagues treat you during your mourning period?" *Did you receive any support from the family/family/community/or church? Did you experience any challenges with the estate (money, policies, cars, houses, etc.) from the family members, children born out of wedlock or your own children?* Each interview lasted between one and one and a half hours. The interviews were conducted in a secure and private space agreed upon between the researchers and the participants. The interviews were recorded with the participants' informed consent and transcribed for analysis. The transcripts were then prepared for thematic analysis and interpretation, ensuring that the participants' voices remained central to the study's analytical outcomes.

VIDEO CONTENT ANALYSIS (VCA)

In addition to interviews, data were also collected through video content analysis. According to Ramey et al. (2016), the video reveals physical responses, including gestures, facial expressions, body language and the use of material objects, to facilitate the exchange of ideas. The videos analysed in this study were recorded during roundtable discussions in Gauteng (June 19–21, 2024). These videos complemented the interview data and enriched the study by capturing non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions, body posture and interaction, which are often missing in interviews. The videos allowed for a deeper understanding of the impact of widowhood, particularly how religion and culture silence widows. Researchers analysed widows' facial expressions, body language and dialogue with the panel. Additionally, the researchers' participation in the discussions provided further context and the video analysis helped triangulate findings with interview data.

DATA TRIANGULATION

Data from semi-structured interviews and videos were triangulated, which, as Donkoh and Mensah (2023) explain, involves examining a phenomenon from multiple sources. The goal is to develop a thorough understanding of widowhood in South Africa. They also highlight that triangulation is crucial for validating and confirming data patterns.

DATA ANALYSIS

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Semi-structured interview data were analysed through thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006 & 2021) describe this method as identifying, examining, and discussing patterns and themes that arise from the data. Using this approach, the interview transcripts were coded by highlighting key and recurring patterns and then grouped into six themes, which were further analysed and defined.

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VIDEO ANALYSIS

The YouTube videos were examined using Visual-Verbal Video Analysis (VVVA), a structured approach to analyse video content systematically. Fazeli, Sabetti and Ferrari (2023) outline VVVA as consisting of six steps: (1) collecting, organising and reviewing data; (2) transcribing verbal interactions; (3) selecting units of analysis; (4) extracting and coding data; (5) organising, describing and interpreting the data; and (6) reporting the results. Figure 2 illustrates these steps visually. After the first step, three videos were downloaded and stored in a designated folder. The researchers reviewed them multiple times, noting key features such as the widows' occupations, relationship statuses, genders, ethnicities, races and residences. Verbal exchanges between the panel and the widows were transcribed in the second step, focusing on the language used by the widows when interacting with the panel, other widows and community members. Technical details, such as the video's source, duration and upload date, were also recorded. In the third step, the analysis included all video elements that directly or indirectly influenced the widows, such as gestures, speech, body language and sounds within the interactions between the widows and the panel. The fourth step focused on extracting, coding and categorising data, emphasising the video's visual characteristics. In the fifth step, the extracted data were organised, interpreted and grouped into themes, which were then integrated with themes that emerged from the interview analysis.

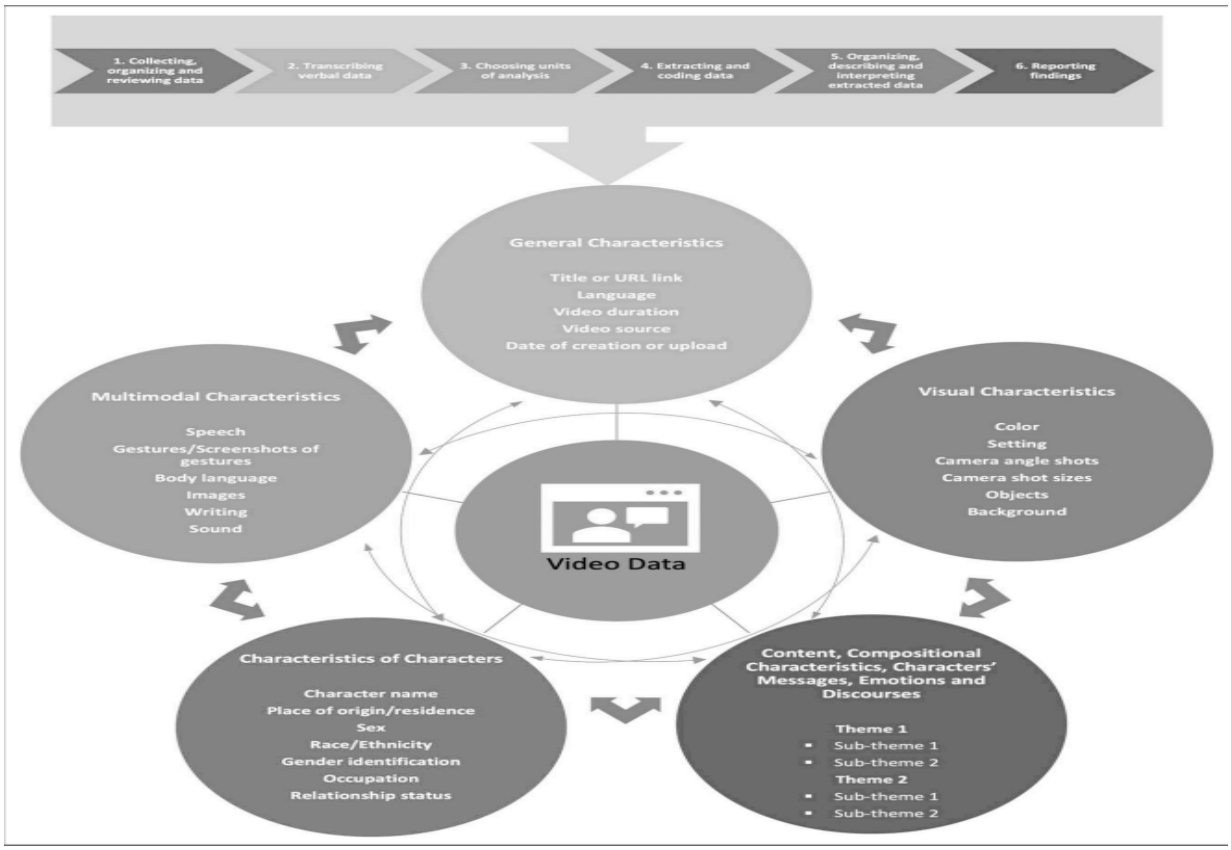


Figure 2: The six steps in the VVVA Method. Diagram adapted from Fazeli et al. (2023)

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study adhered to rigorous ethical standards. The participants in this study participated voluntarily and provided informed consent. Post-interview psychosocial support was available through institutional resources to ensure participants had access to support for grief and

healing. Researchers maintained confidentiality and anonymity throughout the research process to protect participants' identities and dignity.

RESULTS

The Commission on Gender Equality (1997) asserts that widowhood should be understood as a social issue and an internal psychological experience (Buthelezi & Ngema, 2021). Furthermore, widowhood must be framed as a human rights issue, given the numerous challenges widows face from society, their families, marital families and to a significant extent, their churches. These challenges are often perpetuated under the guise of culture and religion. While such cultural and religious practices cannot be entirely dismissed, it is crucial to examine how they are used to marginalise and silence widows, particularly during their most vulnerable period of grief and mourning. To explore these dynamics, this study interviewed widows and identified six key themes emerging from the findings: (1) *The Marital Status of Widows and Asset Distribution; (2). Support from Family, Friends, Community and Church; (3). Health Issues Before and After Widowhood; (4). Clashes Between Widows and the Spouse's Family; (5) Widowhood and Debts; and (6). Widows' Views on Widowhood* as indicated in ***Figure 3.*** The section below presents and critically discusses these findings through the lens of Black Feminist Theory.

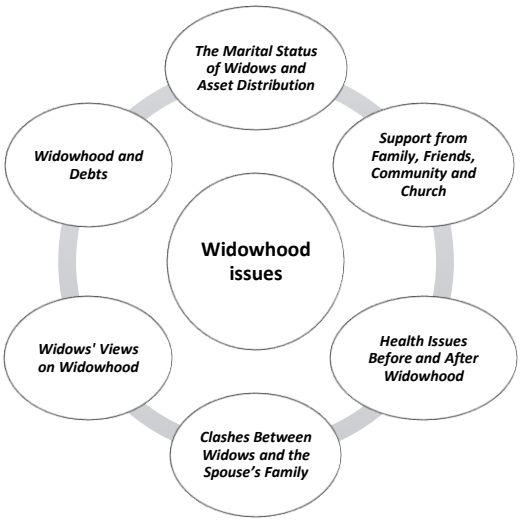


Figure 3: Thematic mapping of the widowhood issues

THE MARITAL STATUS AND DISTRIBUTION OF ASSETS

The data reveal that most widows, both in interviews and videos, were married in a community of property at the time of their husbands' deaths. However, instead of highlighting the benefits of this marital arrangement, the data exposes significant challenges regarding asset distribution. For example, Participant 1 shared that despite being married in a community of property and co-owning a house and a car with her husband, her marital family took possession of these assets after his death. Despite her legal rights, she is still fighting for her home, which her husband's family unlawfully took. Similarly, Participant 3 reported losing a car to her husband's family and was forced to involve the police to prevent her in-laws from removing her from her home. Across testimonies, it is evident that in-laws take over the widows' legal entitlements to property, which suggests a persistent gap between legal provisions and social practices.

These challenges surrounding asset distribution have no legitimate basis, either legally or socially. Marriage in a community of property ensures that both spouses share the benefits and

liabilities of their assets equally, with the surviving spouse inheriting the deceased's wealth and debts (Vincent & Odeku, 2023). Thus, the unlawful appropriation of assets by in-laws raises serious legal concerns. It means that legal laws protecting married individuals are not effectively implemented to protect widows. Therefore, legal action should be pursued against those who infringe upon widows' property rights. Furthermore, the introduction of legislation to protect widows from harmful widowhood rites (Amoo et al., 2022) should be accompanied by laws that penalise individuals, including in-laws, who interfere with the affairs of widows.

The nature of a community of property marriage complicates third-party interference in the widow's rights to her assets. Two critical issues emerge: First, South African widows may lack awareness of their legal entitlements in a community of property marriage. Had they had a better understanding of these legal implications, they might have been able to take legal action against family members for unlawfully seizing their late husband's assets. Second, cultural norms may be cited to justify the return of assets to the husband's family, particularly in Black South African communities where women are expected to integrate fully into their husband's family upon marriage. In such contexts, any assets acquired during the marriage are often viewed as belonging to the husband's family name. This cultural justification, however, is inherently unfair and legally unsound. Notably, a gap persists between the legal framework regulating wealth and the social reality surrounding in-laws on the ground. It is also of concern that the laws do not adequately protect widows from the harassment they receive from their in-laws. However, despite efforts by South African law to ensure access to social security, a legislative gap remains in the Social Assistance Act regarding support for poor widows (Mokoena & Jegede, 2023). Culture should never be invoked as a rationale for the abuse or forced expropriation of assets. Such practices reflect deeply rooted family values that perpetuate the unfair treatment of widows and the manipulation of their rightful assets. South African law stipulates that asset decisions must be made jointly by both spouses (Vincent & Odeku, 2023; Monareng, 2023) and upon one spouse's death, the surviving spouse inherits the estate. Cultural practices should, instead, support and protect widows during their period of mourning.

In addition, Participant 3 shared a troubling experience in which her husband divorced her while she was ill. She only discovered the divorce after his death, complicating asset ownership and leading to further attempts by his family to dispossess her. This highlights the complexities of the South African legal system and its impact on individuals, particularly those who are illiterate. Examining how divorce procedures affect illiterate individuals is crucial, particularly in consideration of human rights and fairness.

Moreover, Participant 3 indicated that "I unknowingly got divorced while he was sick and staying with his family", which affected her rights to her assets and led to accusations from her in-laws of neglecting her late husband. This contrasts with cultural practices in countries such as Uganda, Mali, Zimbabwe, Kenya and Burundi, where widows do not have legal or cultural rights to inherit their husbands' assets (Dube, 2023). In South Africa, however, widows married in a community of property are entitled to their husband's estate and the law must challenge any interference by family members. Participant 3's incident highlights the interference from in-laws in the marital affairs of the two married individuals, thereby complicating the inheritance process after the spouse's death. Asset inheritance is an important aspect of widowhood research. Peterman (2012) points out that African widows often encounter difficulties in securing inheritance rights, increasing their risk of poverty. This reveals the gap between legal frameworks intended to protect widows and the actual enforcement of these rights, particularly in rural and traditional contexts. The findings underscore the pressing need for advocacy, legal literacy initiatives, and community engagement to challenge harmful

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cultural practices. Tackling these issues is vital for empowering widows, maintaining their dignity, and ensuring their security amid deep-rooted societal and cultural obstacles.

UNEMPLOYMENT AND WIDOWHOOD

In a country with weak economic growth, high unemployment and gender inequality, like South Africa, losing a spouse, often the primary breadwinner, exacerbates economic challenges in the household. Many participants in this study experienced financial difficulties that left them vulnerable during the grieving process and beyond. For instance, Participant 2 reported, "I was unemployed" when her husband died, complicating her ability to manage the household and sustain her family. Similarly, Participants 3, 5 and 7 were also unemployed at the time of their husbands' deaths. On the other hand, Participant 8, a pensioner whose husband had passed away, faced unique financial constraints associated with a fixed income. These accounts suggest a pattern in which widowhood worsens the economic fragility of widows, particularly those excluded from the formal labour market. It therefore suggests that gendered inequalities in employment do not only shape women's vulnerability during marriage but may also determine their fate after the loss of a spouse.

Other widows who could not get support from their immediate relatives and friends relied on external networks for survival. Participant 5 stated, "I received support from the church after a particular lady had encouraged me to attend church. The family gave me financial support by buying groceries and emotional support by checking up on the children." Similarly, Participant 9 shared, "The church came to pray for us and sometimes they buy groceries." These accounts underscore the role of community and faith-based organisations in alleviating some of the economic and emotional burdens widows face. However, this support is often uneven and temporary, reflecting that the social institutions, such as the church, fail to offer a lasting solution in such times. The reliance on the church can provide moral and spiritual support. However, it highlights the absence of permanent institutional structures to provide widows with a lasting solution and social protection. Socio-economic support from communities plays a crucial role during the widows' mourning period (Thornton, 2023; Hugo, 2021; Mokoena & Jegede, 2023; Tshaka et al., 2023; Lloyd-Sherlock, Corso, & Minicuci, 2015).

However, not all widows found such support to be sufficient in addressing their challenges. Participant 10 said, "My husband had a debt due to his business failure. He had borrowed R8000 from *Mashonisa* (loan shark) and I managed to pay about R2000 back." Similarly to the inheritance of assets, debts created by one spouse are also inherited by the other spouse (Vincent & Odeku, 2023). This reflects the additional burden of debt, which can further destabilise the already precarious financial situation. The connection in participants' experiences reveals some contradiction, in that while community organisations may provide moral and emotional support, they cannot address the economic challenges, such as debt and unemployment, that widows face. As Segalo (2015) observes, many women still juggle household responsibilities and full-time employment, making it difficult for them to establish themselves in the public sphere. Widows become increasingly vulnerable due to the debts they inherit, mainly when their late husbands are the sole providers. This dynamic suggests that how widowhood exemplifies the intersection of gender and economic dependence, thus reinforcing women's marginalisation. This situation is troubling, as the deceased husband's family is often not acknowledged in cases where widows require support to navigate the economic challenges they face. The absence of the husband's family after death to provide financial and emotional support to the widow exposes the erosion of the relationship that existed when the man was still alive, leaving widows to rely on temporary support structures and individual resilience. Given the circumstances, it is concerning that the late husband's family is frequently absent from efforts aimed at assisting widows overcome financial hardship.

The collected data underscore the significant economic difficulties widows face following the death of their husbands. These challenges include the sudden loss of household income, limited access to resources and the struggle to attain financial independence in a context often lacking adequate support systems. These economic challenges faced by widows reflect a broader socio-economic system characterised by systemic gender inequalities. In many settings, widows are disproportionately impacted by structural barriers such as discriminatory inheritance practices, limited access to formal employment and the undervaluation of women's economic contributions within households. The absence of strong social protection systems worsens their vulnerability, leaving many widows reliant on informal support networks like extended families or faith-based organisations, which may not always be dependable or sustainable. Therefore, Tshaka et al. (2023) argue that social workers must develop programmes specifically for widows as a vulnerable group in South Africa to provide them with economic opportunities. Consequently, this study suggests that interventions should also address the social and legal factors that may sustain widows' marginalisation. In this context, it could be recommended that the government consider providing a social grant for a fixed period to widows who are unable to work due to age or disability, as such support would be a step towards transforming widowhood from a state of economic exclusion to one of social recognition and empowerment.

HEALTH ISSUES BEFORE AND AFTER WIDOWHOOD

Widowhood often brings significant physical and emotional health challenges, stemming both from the caregiving responsibilities that often precede a spouse's death and the grief, stress and social pressures that follow. Widows face complex, interconnected challenges to their health, psychological well-being, social standing and economic stability. These challenges are particularly glaring in under-resourced settings, where widows lack access to healthcare, mental health services and economic opportunities, exacerbating their vulnerability. In resource-constrained settings, widows are disproportionately affected by health-related challenges. Many individuals experience limited access to healthcare facilities, which are often underfunded and poorly equipped to meet their needs (Dube, 2021). This lack of access not only limits treatment options but also reflects the broader neglect of women's health in public policy and social settings.

The international scholarship on widowhood shows that widows experienced several issues during and after the mourning process. Those international experiences are not unique from those of South Africa, as Participant 1 reported being diagnosed with high blood pressure shortly after the death of her husband, attributing this condition to the intense stress of her bereavement. Similarly, Participant 4 developed severe stress-related complications, including difficulty concentrating, inability to focus and decreased productivity at work. She also faced social isolation, as her marital family restricted her movements, requiring her to stay home during her mourning period. To cope with her stress, she turned to an online community for support, relying heavily on social media platforms like TikTok for solace and connection. According to a study by Kim, Kim, Cho and Kim (2023), social media plays a crucial role in preventing and, in some cases, managing depression during widowhood.

Furthermore, Participant 5, who had no known underlying conditions before her husband's death, experienced fainting episodes during her mourning period and needed treatment at a public hospital. However, the cause of these episodes was never revealed. Participant 7 also reported being diagnosed with high blood pressure after her spouse's passing. Some participants faced multiple health challenges. Participant 11, who had been diagnosed with diabetes and high cholesterol before her husband's death, saw a significant decline in her health after he passed away. Her condition worsened and she developed further complications, including heart leakage. In contrast, Participant 8, who had been diagnosed

with diabetes while her husband was alive, reported no significant changes in her health after his death, suggesting that the impact of grief and loss on health can vary greatly among individuals. These health issues highlight the need for interventions that extend beyond merely addressing physiological repercussions and delving into the psychological and emotional ramifications of losing a spouse. By primarily focusing on the intricate dynamics of these factors, policymakers, medical professionals, and caregivers can develop comprehensive strategies that promote resilience and support for widows, thereby enhancing their quality of life (Zhang, Chen, Sun, Feng, Wang, Gu, & Zhang, 2023). These accounts, when compared across participants, reveal how social isolation and limited healthcare access interact to produce compounded health risks, as Participant 1's symptoms illustrate the strain on her emotional well-being, while Participant 4's experiences highlight the psychological effects of cultural mourning practices. These experiences underscore the paradox that practices and rites meant to honour the deceased may inadvertently harm the widow's health and mental well-being.

The data underscore the significant relationship between grief, trauma and physical health, suggesting that bereavement, along with the associated emotional distress, can either trigger or exacerbate existing health conditions. Nevertheless, the widow's development of health issues is concerning, mainly as these issues appear to be stress-related medical conditions. Loss inevitably induces stress, mainly due to the passing of a loved one. However, based on the issues emerging from the data, it could be argued that families play a pivotal role in the health challenges faced by widows during the mourning period. Some of these health issues arise from the silencing that results from unjustified and unlawful actions and practices. Widows are silenced not only through cultural and religious practices but also from the actions of their in-laws and, sometimes, community members.

WIDOWS' SUPPORT NETWORKS OR STRUCTURE

The issue of support in the data is not new in the scholarship of widowhood. As the data has indicated, widowhood is accompanied by profound emotional, social and financial challenges, highlighting the critical importance of support networks in helping widows cope and build resilience. Despite the challenges of grief and widowhood, a supportive system is crucial in helping survivors cope and find meaning in life again (Sekgobela, Peu, & van der Wath, 2020). In this study, the presence or absence of support networks emerged as a key determinant of how widows adapted and adjusted to loss, suggesting that coping patterns extend beyond an individual to a broader social and cultural context. When the participants were asked to share their experiences regarding the support they received during their mourning period, they shared diverse experiences. For instance, *Participants 5, 7, 8 and 9* acknowledged receiving consistent moral, financial and social support from loved ones from the moment of their husbands' passing until they were laid to rest. Likewise, *Participants 1, 2 and 3 highlighted the moral and practical support their immediate families and church communities provided during their time of* mourning. However, these participants noted a stark absence of assistance from their late husbands' families. In cases where support was provided, it was barely noticeable. This reveals a recurring pattern of selective solidarity. While their biological families and social institutions stepped in, their spouses' family often withdraws, exposing the vulnerable state of the relations once the husband dies.

Accordingly, the position of the in-laws in the widows' lives becomes questionable. During the bereavement period, it is normal for people to find comfort from their immediate family and friends. It is even better when the people providing support are also mourning the same person you are, because then you know these people might understand how you feel. In-laws are expected to be the immediate support for the widow, but instead, they pose challenges for her (Amoo et al., 2022). Their actions obliterate the widows, making it look like the relationship

between the in-laws and the widow ends when the husband dies. However, it is essential to note that in most cases, in-laws' issues often begin during the marriage and escalate during the unfortunate event of the husband's passing. This dynamic highlights a deeper tension in extended families, where a widow's legitimacy within the husband's family is tied to her husband's presence. Once he dies, her identity within that family becomes unstable, changing the once site of inclusion to a site of exclusion.

Consequently, widows find consolation in external networks. Support from external networks emerged as a crucial factor for some widows. Participant 5 stated, "I received support from the church after a particular lady had encouraged me to attend church. The family gave me financial support by buying groceries and emotional support by checking up on the children." Similarly, Participant 9 shared, "The church came to pray for us and sometimes they buy groceries." These accounts underscore the role of community and faith-based organisations in alleviating some of the economic and emotional burdens widows face. The reliance on such networks exposes the withdrawal of family members from social protection and moral support responsibilities, taking the burden of care into informal structures.

The data indicate that support for widows can take many forms, including emotional support, financial assistance, or practical help with daily tasks such as cooking, laundry and cleaning. However, the type and level of support often depend on several factors, such as cultural norms, the widow's relationship with her community and the empathy and understanding of those around her. Some widows in this study reported receiving significant comfort and support from their social networks, while others faced little support or rejection, revealing different relationship dynamics. For many widows, the absence of expected support made their post-loss challenges even harder. These differences show that widowhood varies widely and is shaped by social factors such as gender, kinship, and more cultural factors.

VIEWS, BELIEFS AND OPINIONS ABOUT WIDOWHOOD EXPERIENCE

While widows share everyday experiences, their belief systems often shape their perspectives on life. Participants were asked about their perceptions of cultural and socialisation practices and how these influenced their widowhood rites. They were also invited to reflect on the role of cultural socialisation in shaping their approach to widowhood and share any additional aspects that were not explicitly addressed in the interview tool. Participant 5 noted, "Widows do not experience widowhood the same way and I wish there were a place where widows could gather together." This indicates a desire among widows for spaces to discuss their experiences with others who understand their unique struggles. Similarly, Rathnayake Halloluwa, Bandara, Narasinghe and Vyas (2021) advocate for social networks, such as social media platforms, where widows can share their experiences.

Participant 7 emphasised the adverse treatment of widows, particularly those from different cultural backgrounds, stating, "The community does not treat widows well, especially coming from different cultures. There are suspicions that the widow has killed her husband." Participant 4 expressed that widows should have the opportunity to participate in certain activities after the death of their husbands. Participant 1 highlighted the exploitative behaviours of relatives, saying, "Sometimes cultural norms dictate that a man, such as my husband, should support his sisters, even with limited resources. When he passes away, these same relatives, driven by desperation, come and take possession of the widow's home." These diverse responses underscore how culture, religion and personal experiences shape perceptions of widowhood. Participant 4 believes that traditional medicines should be provided to widows to help them cope with grief, while Participant 8 advocates for socialisation programs to teach young women how to navigate marriage and widowhood. In contrast, Participant 6 suggests that "the widow's family should lead some cultural practices towards widows." The findings reveal a

rich tapestry of beliefs, opinions and sincerely personal views that reflect how cultural norms, societal expectations and individual experiences intersect to shape widowhood, providing a deeper understanding of the psychological and social dimensions of widowhood and highlighting the complex relationship between cultural practices and the lived realities of widows.

CONCLUSION

The challenges of widowhood in South Africa remain an under-researched yet critical issue, deeply embedded in cultural, religious and socio-economic contexts (Dube, 2023; Tshaka et al., 2023). Widows are often subjected to stigma, neglect and exploitation while their voices are systematically silenced under the guise of cultural and religious traditions. These injustices require a multifaceted approach to address them. This approach should combine research, policy interventions, women's empowerment, community support and social education to protect and uplift widows. The challenges widows often face are not just widowhood issues but human rights issues. Therefore, the Department of Women, Youth and Persons with disabilities, the Department of Social Development, in collaboration with the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development, should develop programmes that protect the dignity of widowed women and ensure that the constitution protects them against abuse after the loss of their spouses. In addition, legal education on legislation such as the *Maintenance of Surviving Spouses Act 27 of 1990* can help conscientize widows about their rights after the death of their spouses.

The empirical research on widowhood challenges in South Africa remains under-researched despite growing international attention on widowhood scholarship. There is an urgent need for in-depth, multidisciplinary studies to examine the experiences of widowhood across diverse cultural, religious, socio-economic and educational backgrounds. Research should move beyond general challenges of widows to explore less-examined aspects such as widows' sexual autonomy, economic survival and social reintegration after loss. The outcomes of the more extensive evidence-based research should facilitate policy reforms that prioritise widows' rights and well-being, ensuring stronger legal protections against the dispossession and exploitation of widowed women.

South African widows also face severe financial instability and legal vulnerability, especially regarding inheritance and asset ownership. They are likely to lose property to their late husbands' families due to legal illiteracy or manipulative cultural practices. To mitigate this, widows should have access to legal and financial training to equip them with knowledge of marital contracts, inheritance laws and financial planning. In addition, widows' economic independence should be improved through skills training and employment opportunities, reducing reliance on extended family members who may exploit rather than support them.

Gender inequality remains evident in widowhood practices in South Africa. This imbalance reinforces deep-rooted gender bias that must be addressed. As Ramphele (1996) and Khosa-Nkatini (2022) observed, widows are expected to follow restrictive mourning rituals, while widowers are mainly exempt from such practices. Therefore, future research should widen the scope of widowhood studies to include widowers' experiences, shedding light on how men navigate loss and societal expectations. A gender-inclusive perspective could enrich the discourse on widowhood and challenge stereotypes that link masculinity with emotional resilience and femininity with public mourning. Another notable yet overlooked aspect of widowhood scholarship is the role of women in enforcing harmful cultural norms against other women. Female elders, in-laws and community members often uphold and enforce widowhood rites that oppress widows, perpetuating cycles of gendered violence under the

guise of tradition. This issue calls for a stronger feminist critique and engagement to ensure that women do not become unwitting advocates of their own oppression.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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