

Resilience in Widowhood: The Coping Mechanisms against the Social Odds Occasioned by Death of a loved one in Kenya

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Abstract

Widowhood is a subject that has attracted scholarly discourse in the recent past. Widowhood comes as a result of the death of a spouse. Most studies mainly focus on the widows' negative experiences and forget to document their resilience and the factors contributing to this among certain widows. This study examined widows' coping mechanisms against the social challenges occasioned by widowhood. The study used the mixed-method research approach in collecting data. The target population was widows aged 18 years and above. The study used a sample size of 50 respondents drawn from the five wards of Tharaka South and Tharaka North Sub-Counties. Qualitative data was collected through in-depth interviews with key informants and focus group discussions. Data were summarized and analyzed thematically. The study established that widows face loneliness, discrimination, lack of support from their in-laws, conflicts, rejection by the community members and intrusions by relatives. To cope with these challenges, avoidance, engagement in economic activities, seeking divine intervention, seeking support from the authorities as well as learning to accept own situation were some of the coping mechanisms employed. Future studies could consider delving into the extent of the role of religion in developing resilience among widows as well as the magnitude of self-realization upon the loss of a loved one.

Keywords: coping mechanisms, widowhood, resilience, death

1. Introduction

The estimated number of widowed persons worldwide in 2020 was approximately 350 million, with the large majority, roughly 80 percent, being widowed women. While globally, about one

out of every 15 people in the marital ages are widowed, country rates vary enormously across a broad range (Chamie, 2022). Widowhood is a social condition requiring attention and necessary support. The most important component in understanding and assisting widows is exploring the challenges and strengths found in widowhood. The loss of a life partner and what follows after, significantly impact every aspect of a widow's life. It alters the foundation of interpersonal relationships created and maintained throughout the marriage, affecting regulation, attachment, identity, and social roles (Karantzas et al., 2022). According to a study conducted by Karantzas et al. (2022), on the emotional state and self-management of widows, widows seemed overwhelmed by the need for courage and strength to overcome the unbearable emotional state in the first phase of their loss. The resilience protocol, as a result, applies where widows require an expanded period to boost their wellbeing and self-management. Other widows struggled for their survival by hiding their suffering, including physical, social, and psychological problems (Majid & Ennis, 2022).

In addition to the emotional stress and sorrow of widowhood, most people are unprepared to deal with the daunting challenges following the death of a spouse (Shahnazarian & Ziemer, 2018). Rather than treating widowhood as a taboo subject or something to ponder only in old age, couples need to discuss, plan and make decisions early on regarding the eventual and inevitable passing away of one's spouse (Yang & Gu, 2021).

Despite the challenges that come with widowhood, some widows have demonstrated a high level of resilience and have overcome the challenges. Recent trends have revealed a heightened level of resilience among widows than expected (Deepak & Annalakshmi, 2021; King, Carr, & Taylor, 2019). This shows that widowhood does not necessarily relegate the victims to adversities.

Even in light of these revelations, there seems to be a dearth of studies, particularly in Africa, examining the factors behind the abilities of widows to overcome the challenges considering the turbulence that accompanies widowhood. Most scholars have concentrated on the need to understand the challenges of vulnerable women, yet widows have been overlooked in most of these studies. Available studies of widowhood heavily focused on the psychological process of coping, the role of loss associated with widowhood, and the role and nature of social support. There are no studies conducted that focused on resilience that enables widows to bounce back following the death of their spouses, particularly in Tharaka South and North Sub-Counties.

2. Methodology

This research was carried out in Tharaka South and North Sub-Counties in Tharaka Nithi County, Kenya. The study adopted a mixed research design which includes quantitative and qualitative. The targeted population for this study was widows residing in Tharaka South and North Sub-Counties. The purposive sampling technique was used to arrive at a sample population of 50 respondents. The sample was based on their knowledge and experience of the group. Snowballing technique was used to identify the respondents. The respondents were selected through the snowball method of sampling. Data was collected through oral testimonies, questionnaires, face-to-face questionnaires, and a focus group discussion guide. Data were analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative methods.

3. Results

Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

The demographic characteristics investigated included the age of the respondents, number of years as a widow, and number of children. Table 1 below presents the findings

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Variable	Frequency	Percentage	
Age of respondents	Below 35	12	24
	35-50	15	30
	51-65	16	32
	66-80	6	12
	81-95	1	2
Number of years as a widow	0-3	13	26
	4-7	23	46
	8-10	7	14
	11-13	4	8
	14 and above	4	8
Number of Children	0-2	12	24
	3-4	23	46
	5-6	8	16
	More than 6	7	14

As indicated in Table 1 above, 32% and 30% of the respondents were aged between 51-65 years and 35-50 years respectively. About 46% of the respondents had been widows for 4-7 years, while 26% indicated that they had been widows for not more than three years. Also, 14% of the respondents indicated that they had been widows for 8-10 years. Table 1 above summarizes the findings.

3.1 Challenges Faced

The social challenges mentioned by the respondents were cross-tabulated as indicated in Figure 1 below

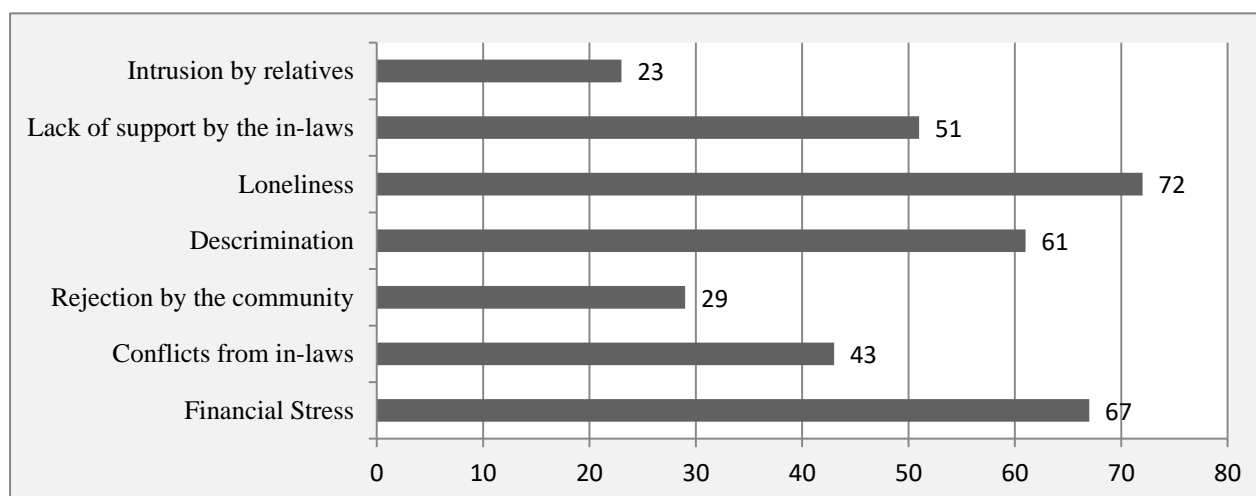


Figure 1. Social Challenges

As indicated in Figure 1 above, about 72% of the respondents indicated that they faced loneliness after the loss of their husbands. Further, 67% of the respondents indicated financial challenges when they lost their husbands. Among the respondents, 61% indicated that they faced discrimination after losing their husbands. Of those interviewed, 51%, 43%, 29%, and 23% indicated that they lacked support from their in-laws, faced conflicts, were rejected by the community members, and experienced intrusions by relatives.

3.2 Handling of the Challenges Faced by Respondents

The study established and documented various coping mechanisms that the widow respondents made use of to improve on their wellness. The coping mechanisms that the widows employed included; seeking divine intervention, social support, keeping busy, acceptance, avoidance and embracing change. The widow respondents had to initially engage with the new situation, accept the reality and after rationalization, learn how to cope with the new reality in a more positive manner and move on.

3.3 Adjusting to Cope with Change

Most respondents indicated that death of a spouse implied changes in life which one had to adjust to cope with the changes in their lives. They had to do things differently so as to cope with the reality of the absences of their spouses. One of the respondents stated this:

When I lost my husband, it took me time to accept the reality. Things were not moving well. Everything seemed to be a mess. I was not accepted. Right in my family, I could not measure up to what my husband used to do. I hardly met the needs of my family. When I learnt to accept the reality that he was no more, I had to adjust with the changes in life and take up all the roles knowing that I was now all alone.

3.4 Accepting the Death of the Spouse

The study found that the majority of the respondents had to accept the death of the spouse and move on with life. They indicated that acceptance was about accepting life on life's terms and not resisting what you cannot or choose not to change:

I had to accept that he is no more and I'm now a widow and life will never be the same again and I had to move on. I had to accept that my husband is gone and life will never be the same again. I had to face the in-laws concerning the inheritance of my late husband's property and I had to seek legal services to assist in the case. I relocated and ensured that I continued and upheld my late husband's aspirations, and worked hard and supported the children to maturity. I moved on with life, kept the right company with the right people, worked hard and avoided idleness.

Coping with the Challenge of Loneliness

“Value of friends”

Other respondents indicated that they had to get other friends whom they confided in. Such friends were not necessarily from the same sex but also the opposite sex. One respondent indicated that:

We all need someone we intimately share with. In my case, I got a male friend with whom we shared my issues. By the mere fact that there was someone to lean on. I felt comfortable and happy.

Another respondent shared the following:

In my case, I had a friend...a dear friend. We shared much in common. To cope with the social challenges in my life, I became a lot more dependent on her. I could spend time at her place and she could also come over to my place. So we exchanged ideas and just comforted one another. I realized that coping required that I spend time with my friend and shared our challenges. When I spoke to my friend, I felt better and life was better that way. I realized that with my friend on my side, I could face all the challenges in life. We could brainstorm on where to get assistance from. And even where to invest economically.

Solace could also be sought and obtained in religion. Respondents indicated that they got new friends from their religious organizations.

In the church, I have made friends - friends who I can turn to. We form groups and from the groups within the church, we get to interact one on one. It is from this that I get to share my challenges with friends. These are people who know me as I am. They don't think of me as a widow or a person who should be rejected. Such pure motives are what drive friendship.

Others also indicated that they formed groups within the community from which they shared their challenges and developed friendship.

In our women's group, we share our challenges. Through this, we can come out with better coping mechanisms. The friendship we develop among ourselves keeps us going. So I don't have to look for friends from elsewhere. I already have enough friends from the members of the group. We share a lot in common and we are always there for each other.

3.5 Coping with Financial Stress and Lack of Support from the In-laws

Adjusting to changes in economic status, respondents indicated that they reduced their spending and sought other sources of income. Some of the respondents also joined savings and credit movements,

Recognizing that I could not cater to all the economic needs of my family, I decided to greatly cut down my expenses. I had to rely on affordable food items, clothing and other household items.

The best option for me was to join savings and credit movements. Through our group, we were able to encourage each other to seek economic activities. From whatever small businesses we participated in, we were able to save, borrow money and expand our businesses.

Asked to indicate how they coped with the challenge of lack of support from their in-laws,

respondents indicated that they received support from other people who were not necessarily related to them. One of the respondents stated:

My in-laws offer absolutely no support to me. I do not count on their support. The people who sometimes support me are just friends and those from outside there. Yes, I am assisted by people who are not my relatives at all.

3.6 Coping with Conflicts and Intrusions from In-laws

Conflicts arise from ownership of the property left by the deceased. Respondents indicated that they faced conflicts with their in-laws and other people who claimed their property. Sometimes intrusions occurred when other people felt entitled to use the property of the deceased. Various coping mechanisms were employed by the respondents to deal with such intrusions and conflicts.

3.7 Avoidance

Avoidance implied that the respondents simply ignored such intrusions from the community members. It emerged that ‘keeping silent and not confronting the offenders was an easier way of dealing with such offenders. One of the respondents indicated this:

I choose to keep quiet. When they provoke me to conflict, I just keep quiet. I have learned that sometimes we just ignore. And in most cases, the person gets tired and sooner or later they keep off.

3.8 Keeping Off

The respondents also indicated that they chose to keep off from their in-laws and the community at large. One of the respondents shared this:

The first thing I did was to move away from the presence of my in-laws. I rented a house away from them. This saved me so many conflicts and intrusions. I also decided to minimize my communications with them.

Enlisting support from the local authorities.

It emerged from the study that as a way of coping with conflicts and intrusions from the community members, respondents enlisted support from the chiefs in their region. This ensured that in-laws and other community members were sensitized against involvement in conflicts with them. One of the respondents stated the following:

The first thing I did when I experienced conflicts was to go to the chief. I explained to the chief my challenges and he agreed to protect me. He did mention my case in his meetings with the community members and warned against such intrusions. From there, I have always enjoyed peace from the community members and more so my in-laws. The only challenge I am facing now is that some of those community members now discriminate against me. They don't like me because I am protected by the chief.

3.9 Coping with Rejection and Discrimination by the Community Members

Rejection by the community members was majorly based on the suspicions of involvement in the death of their spouses. Some of the respondents indicated that they were accused of being behind their husbands' death. They had to present the hospital documents to family members to prove the cause of the death of their husband. Various coping mechanisms were employed to deal with such rejections from the community members.

3.10 Keeping Busy

Keeping busy implies minding one's own business regardless of the rejection from the community members. Respondents indicated that they took up new hobbies, focused on their careers, and worked hard. They resolved to be assertive, focused, self-confident and courageous, work hard and kept busy. One of the widows responded thus:

To keep me busy and occupied, I started a business. This was beside my other job. I just decided to work hard and keep myself busy and ensured that all the plans we had developed with my late husband were fully implemented. I became more assertive and focused. I did not have to accept any busybody trying to spew negative comments about me. I also avoided 'bad' friends.

3.11 Seeking Divine Intervention

Devine intervention refers to the action of surrendering one's destiny to a supernatural being. In the context of this study, respondents indicated that they sought intervention from God when they realized they were now alone and were faced with the reality of the death of their spouses. They put their trust in God and believed that God would intervene and provide the necessary support they needed in life. They attended religious gatherings regularly and this provided the satisfaction they needed in life. One of the respondents shared the following;

When I realized that I had been deserted by my friends and family members, I joined the church. I also started attending all church functions. It is from the church that I found a new family. I found real friends. I even found people with whom we shared our condition. You see, they were like me and we encouraged each other a lot. Church, therefore, became my source of consolation and God used the church members to support me.

4. Discussion

The study sought to understand the coping mechanisms employed by the widows to tackle the social challenges they faced upon the death of their spouses. The study identified that the challenges faced by widows included loneliness, discrimination, lack of support from their in-laws, conflicts, rejection by the community members and intrusions by relatives. The findings of the study may lead to a sound understanding of the challenges that widows faced upon the death of their spouses. Such challenges are as highlighted above. In a study conducted by Dube and Phethlo-Thekisho (2019), they indicated that widows are faced with the fear of taking up family responsibilities, feelings of regret, threats, and fear for their own lives; while the social challenges included poverty and financial stress, conflicts, isolation

and rejection among other challenges.

Different mechanisms were employed to cope with such challenges. The widows had to learn to do things differently. They had to adjust to cope with the changes in their lives. A study conducted in Nepal by Hendrickson et al. (2018) indicated that widows quickly come up with adaptive mechanisms which define resilience upon the loss of their spouses. The widows have to take up roles that hitherto were performed by their spouses upon their death. Andersen and Brünner (2020) posit that widows slowly learn the absence of commensality upon the death of their spouses and slowly learn to live with the reality of ended companionship.

Further, the need to accept the reality of the absence of their spouses is crucial in helping them adapt to the new status of widowhood. The study established that the widows had to accept the fact that their husbands were no more and that they had to pick pieces of their lives and move on. This finding is in line with the findings of Jones-Rogers (2019) that the sooner the widows accept the loss of their spouses, the sooner their healing process begin. According to Majid and Ennis (2022), failure to cope with widowhood is an indication of a failure to accept the loss of a spouse.

4.1 Coping Mechanisms Applied

Coping with the Challenge of Loneliness

The study established that making new friends is one of the coping mechanisms employed by widows to cope with the challenge of loneliness. Such friends formed a social network for the widows and as such the widows relied on them for social support and thus beating the risk of loneliness. This finding leads to the understanding that friends, and especially for widows, cushion them from loneliness as a result of the loss of their spouses. According to Berg-Weger and Morley (2020), the dangers of loneliness, and especially in old age may result in deterioration of health. King, Carr, and Taylor (2021) posit that the role of friends in healing and coping for widows cannot be overlooked if the welfare of the widows was to be addressed.

The study established that religion also provided the needed company to escape loneliness. In the study, widows joined religious organizations where they could interact with the congregants and share their issues with them. They also got new friends from the church. Religion provided the needed warmth and thus avoidance of loneliness. This, therefore, defines resilience for such individuals faced with loneliness upon the death of their spouses. This finding is similar to those of Chan, Michalak, and Ybarra (2019) who provided that widows easily turned to religion to redefine their purpose in life. Further, Vedder et al. (2022) provide that loneliness at bereavement can be faced using various mechanisms and such including seeking solace in religion. The study also established that widows formed support groups and from the support groups they made friends with whom they shared their issues. It is such friends whom the widows counted on when in need. This finding provides evidence for welfare groups as cushioning the widows from loneliness. This finding is in line with those of AL-Baddareen, Al Ali, and Akour (2020) who also established the role of social support groups in alleviating loneliness.

4.2 Coping with Financial Stress and Lack of Support from in-laws

Financial stress is emotional tension that is specifically related to money (Munyon, Carnes, Lyons, & Zettler, 2020). In the case of widows, financial stress occurred in households with low incomes upon the death of the spouses. Such stress resulted from not making enough money to meet their needs such as paying rent, paying the bills, and buying groceries. The study established that the death of the spouse also resulted in economic stress. While this was the case, the study documents cases where support from in-laws was not forthcoming. The widows, therefore, to cope with the financial stress and lack of support from their in-laws, reduced their expenses, joined savings and credit movements, and diversified their sources of income. In a study conducted by Verma (2018), women organized themselves into groups where they saved and accessed credit facilities. This helped in cushioning them from economic vulnerabilities. Similar findings have also been recorded by Chami and Pooley (2021); and Aslam (2021) who both highlighted the need for diversification of sources of income for widows upon the death of their spouses. Where such supports anticipated from the in-laws were not forthcoming, the respondents were supported by other people who were not their relatives. Motsoeneng and Modise (2020), in their study in South Africa, highlighted the failing roles of the in-laws in supporting the widows and conclude that such support was not worth counting on and therefore the widows in their study sought support from other people outside their family relations. Such findings are similar to the ones established in this study.

4.3 Coping with Conflicts and Intrusions from in-laws

The study established that widows faced conflicts with their in-laws and other people who claimed their property. The widows employed various coping mechanisms including avoidance and keeping off, and enlisting support from the authorities from the findings of this study. Avoidance is an act of keeping off from in-laws and other persons for not being involved in conflicts. The study established that as a coping mechanism, the widows avoided instances where conflicts may arise when it comes to property ownership. This they deemed as a strategy for avoiding conflicts. They also kept off the issues of their in-laws and the community at large. These findings may lead to the understanding that conflicts avoidance and keeping off were some of the effective mechanisms for coping with conflicts and intrusions from in-laws by the widows. While conflict avoidance is considered maladaptive (Diehl, Bravo-Rivera, & Quirk, 2019), other scholars argue that it works well in a situation that one cannot change (De Castella, Platow, Tamir, Gross, & Emotion, 2018; Moses, 2018). Similarly, in a study conducted by Shahnazarian and Ziemer (2018), widows actively avoided their in-laws whom they described as their source of conflict.

The study also established that the widows enlisted support from the chiefs in their localities. Such support ensured that they were not attached and that their property was not taken away from them. This finding highlights the role played by the authorities in ensuring the safety of the widows. This support counts in developing resilience for the widows. In a study conducted by Nakanyete et al. (2020) however, the support from the authorities did not ensure the safety of the widows since they conspired with the in-laws to subject their conflict.

4.4 Coping with Rejection and Discrimination by the Community Members

Rejection and discrimination of widows are documented in many studies (Chikezie, Obioma, & Emenike; Momanyi, Get, & Ojore, 2021). Some of the widows in this study indicated that they were accused of being behind their husbands' death. As such, they were rejected and discriminated against by the community members. To cope with this, the widows engaged in various activities to keep themselves busy. In a study conducted by Muthangya (2019) widows indicated that they were rejected by their community members on suspicion of having been involved in their spouse's death. As a result, they were discriminated against in society. Such widows developed resilience by keeping themselves busy with many other productive activities. Further, the study established that widows sought divine intervention for acceptance and solace when rejected and discriminated against.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The study was conducted in Tharaka North and South Sub-Counties. The study sought to investigate the coping mechanisms against social challenges faced by widows. It was established that widows face loneliness, discrimination, and lack of support from their in-laws, conflicts, rejection by the community members and intrusions by relatives. To cope with these challenges, avoidance, engagement in economic activities, seeking divine intervention, seeking support from the authorities as well as learning to accept own situation were some of the coping mechanisms employed. Such strategies employed define resilience in the wake of social challenges. Future studies could consider an analysis of the extent to which support from religious organizations helps in developing resilience among widows. It could also be argued from the findings of this study that widowhood resulted in self-realization. Future studies could consider optimization of the benefits of such self-realization for economic and social growth.

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