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Beyond the Veil: Voices of Young Widows in South Africa

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Abstract: This article outlines the experiences of young widows in southern Africa and the impact of widowhood on their livelihoods. Despite numerous human rights frameworks addressing women's issues, widowhood has not received adequate attention in the Global South. Widows often endure terrible and abusive treatment during widowhood. This study focuses on women's perspectives by examining the impact of widowhood issues through case studies. The data were obtained from interviews conducted in a larger study on widowhood issues in South Africa. It explores the experiences and challenges five young widows face, analyses societal perceptions of widowhood, and examines the familial imperatives surrounding widowhood. Intersectionality theory was adopted in this article. The results show that young widows face serious inheritance challenges and abuse at the hands of their in-laws. Because the young widows viewed widowhood rites as part of their culture, they were not opposed to them.

Keywords: intersectionality; mourning rituals; widowhood; young widows

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1. Introduction

Widowhood is widely regarded as a women's issue. In developed countries and nearly all developing nations, women are more likely than men to outlive their spouses (Freak-Poli et al. 2022) because of life expectancy differences (Zarulli et al. 2021) and because women tend to marry slightly older men (Szinovacz 2020). Women are also more likely to remain unmarried after the death of their spouse, owing to a skewed sex ratio among older adults and men's greater desire to remarry (Carr and Bodnar-Deren 2009). In summary, women usually marry significantly older men and men tend to have shorter lives than women (Egharevba and Oboite 2024).

The passing away of a partner leaves a woman with feelings of abandonment and despair because she will miss his companionship, affection, care, and income (Kamunyu and Makena 2020). It means the loss of a companion and, occasionally, his income, a lower social standing, and a reduced way of life. Such a traumatic event necessitates not only changes in the surviving partner's social roles but also other transitions (Kamunyu and Makena 2020). Widowhood frequently rouses sympathy and guilt in African society (Fasanmi and Ayivor 2021), resulting in pleasant or unpleasant experiences.

Widowhood usually poses significant problems for women because they must bear the socioeconomic burden (Cebekhulu 2015). Widows face unique social and economic circumstances, and their experiences of widowhood vary according to cultural, religious, and societal factors (Ouazzani et al. 2021). While it is natural to grieve over a loved one, death is non-negotiable and beyond human control (Magudu and Mohlakoana-Motopi 2013). Despite the trauma that goes with it and its increasing prevalence, people are hesitant to discuss widowhood.

This research article explores the lived experiences and societal challenges faced by young widows in South Africa, highlighting their resilience and the interplay of cultural, economic, and social factors that shape their narratives, ultimately advocating for greater recognition and support for this marginalized group within the broader discourse on widowhood and gender equity.

1.1. Background

Widows around the world face varying degrees of difficulties and hardship. In their social interaction, they have to focus on other single individuals instead of couples and make do without daily intimacy (Kamunyu and Makena 2020). Their economic well-being is also diminished. Widows in sub-Saharan Africa typically suffer deprivation, emotional instability, ritual defilement, socioeconomic challenges, and psychological trauma (Egharevba and Oboite 2024). According to Fasanmi and Ayivor 2021, the widow is robbed of not only her rights as a wife and/or mother, her personhood, and her dignity but also her access to her nuclear family's assets. In many parts of the world, widows are the victims of their circumstances because of structural inequalities and patriarchal gender norms (Sengupta and Calo 2016).

Worldwide, widowhood among younger women is a serious yet sometimes disregarded problem. Although widowhood has traditionally been linked to older persons (Yang 2021), an increasing amount of research suggests that younger women also go through this life transition, frequently with significant effects on their emotional, social, and financial well-being (Streeter 2020; Barros-Lane et al. 2024). An estimated 259 million women worldwide are widowed, with a significant percentage of them being under 40. A woman who becomes a widow at a younger age may need greater protection for her human rights than an elderly widow since she is more likely to be abused, neglected, and socially excluded, particularly by her in-laws (Fasanmi and Ayivor 2021). Due to the intersection of youth and widowhood, this group is especially susceptible to social stigma and financial difficulties (Amoo et al. 2022).

In South Africa and many other African countries, a significant number of young women have experienced or are experiencing widowhood. The interwoven patriarchal power structures ingrained in African nations' marriage institutions, religions, and cultures have led to a cycle of oppression and unfavorable perceptions about widows (Fasanmi and Ayivor 2021). Exploring the experiences of African widows is crucial to ensuring their basic human rights as individuals with agency in African communities. Upon the death of their spouses, African widows must contend with various social, economic, and religious difficulties (Nyangweso 2017).

Women generally live longer than men because of their age differences. This trend is seen not only in South Africa but also in countries across the globe. According to Statistics South Africa (2013), the estimated life expectancy of men and women is 57.7 and 61.4 years, respectively. As a result, many women are likely to spend a significant part of their lives as widows. Younger men die at higher rates than women, especially in situations involving violence, accidents, and medical emergencies. According to Hossin (2021), men are generally at a disadvantage due to occupational dangers and so-called male behaviors that are extremely dangerous and harmful to their health. As a result, men are disproportionately killed in car accidents, work-related accidents, war, and athletic events (Short et al. 2013). This trend adds to the rising number of young widows, as many women experience bereavement while they are still establishing their families and lives. Most of them will never remarry. According to research, younger widows have a lower likelihood of getting married again than their male counterparts (Amoo et al. 2022). Numerous social and cultural elements, such as cultural norms, the stigma associated with widowhood, and the difficulties of being a single parent, can be blamed for this phenomenon (Karupiah 2022; Sumari et al. 2024). Conversely, young widowers might experience less stigma and social pressure, which could make remarriage easier for them (Muchiri 2022). This distinction highlights the particular difficulties experienced by young widows, who frequently have to negotiate difficult social and emotional environments after losing their husbands. Despite the high number of widows, there are no reliable statistics documenting their experiences and challenges in South Africa. Widowhood is, in fact, one of the most neglected areas of research in the country and is rarely mentioned in studies on women's poverty, development, health, or human rights published in the last 25 years (Magudu and Mohlakoana-Motopi 2013).

This article seeks to answer the question: What are the emotional and social challenges faced by young widows in South Africa following the death of their husbands?

1.2. Conceptualizing Widowhood

More psychological and social changes are required during widowhood than in any other life event. For older women, it is one of the most disruptive experiences (Lin and Brown 2020). Widowhood is a period of transition that includes the spouse's illness and death, funeral customs and ceremonies, sorrow, and the process of rebuilding one's social network. The surviving spouse must adjust to her new position and deal with emotional trauma (Chami and Pooley 2023). Women's lives are unavoidably affected by widowhood. Losing a spouse significantly alters a woman's status, stability, and security (Senyah 2021). Despite the trauma and increasing commonness of widowhood, people are hesitant to discuss it.

The significant strain on African widows is attributed to the dual burden of managing household tasks on their own while attempting to shoulder their family responsibilities (Sossou 2002). Kenen (2021) claims that most widows have to deal with financial difficulties following their husbands' deaths because they did not assume the primary responsibility for their family's finances while their husbands were alive. The surviving spouse's situation is precarious, as she must handle urgent problems without the support of her deceased husband, whose absence remains at the forefront of her emotions and thoughts (Cebekhulu 2015). As they try to manage their homes and children—responsibilities that were formerly shared with their spouse—widows frequently experience instability and difficulties (Barlin et al. 2021). Even though becoming a widow is an extremely stressful life event, most people adjust successfully over time; yet for others, re-establishing a new life and social order can be a difficult and drawn-out process (Senyah 2021).

Many countries deny widows the ability to inherit or claim their land and subject them to not only cruel and potentially fatal widowhood customs but also various sorts of abuse. Although they may be married in a community of property, this may be overlooked. In South Africa, Section 18(a) of Matrimonial Property Act 88 of 1984 stipulates that when one chooses to marry in a community of property, all assets and liabilities accumulated by either spouse before or during the marriage become jointly owned unless an antenuptial contract is signed (Monareng 2023). Frequently, they face house eviction, physical abuse, or even death at the hands of their in-laws. A woman loses her place in society when her spouse passes away since, in many civilizations, a woman's social status is directly correlated with that of her spouse (Sahoo 2014). The family is the primary mourning environment since it can help widows adjust and deal with their loss (Hochman et al. 2022). The loss alters the dynamics of the family, causing members to rearrange themselves and form a new family structure (Delalibera et al. 2015). Women cannot grieve in isolation since it is seen as a family affair (Stroebe and Schut 2015; Albuquerque et al. 2016).

Young widows with children face a unique and challenging journey through grief and loss. They often experience a dual burden: mourning their spouse while also managing their children's emotional needs. This can lead to complex feelings of guilt and sadness, as they feel the need to be strong for their children while grappling with their own loss (Peichich-Aizen and Segal-Engelchin 2022). If grief is not processed healthily, it can negatively impact a child's learning and mental health (Eftoda 2021).

Financial strain is another significant challenge for young widows with children. They often face increased financial pressures, managing household expenses alone while providing for their children's needs (Williams 2023). This can lead to stress and anxiety about their financial future, which is less pronounced for childless widows (Liu et al. 2020). Daily responsibilities of parenting can be overwhelming, and balancing grief with childcare demands can hinder the grieving process (Peichich-Aizen and Segal-Engelchin 2022).

Decision-making becomes more complex for widows with children, as they must consider their children's well-being in decisions like moving to a new home or changing jobs. These decisions are further complicated by their grief (Peichich-Aizen and Segal-

Engelchin 2022). However, widows are typically left to support themselves and their children after their spouses pass away (Amoo et al. 2022; Dube 2023; Majid and Ennis 2022).

Social dynamics also play a role. The presence of children can complicate dating and remarriage prospects, as potential partners may feel apprehensive about stepping into a family dynamic that includes the memory of a deceased spouse (Lakatos 2023). However, young widows with children may find more structured support through community resources aimed at families, such as grief counseling for children and support groups for single parents (Peichich-Aizen and Segal-Engelchin 2022).

In terms of remarriage, many young widows prioritize their children's happiness and let life unfold naturally over time (Hidaya et al. 2024). The deceased spouse often remains a significant presence in family life, which can complicate new relationships. Widows may feel torn between honoring their late partner's memory and moving forward (Peichich-Aizen and Segal-Engelchin 2022).

The experiences of young widows are profoundly shaped by their parental status. Those with children face unique challenges and emotional complexities that influence their grieving process, social interactions, and practical life decisions.

1.3. Widowhood in the South African Context

Studies indicate that about 16% of adult women in South Africa are widows, with a significant number of these women being under 40 years old; hence, this highlights the urgent need for targeted interventions to support young widows (Lloyd-Sherlock et al. 2015).

Various cultural beliefs and conventions determine how widows and widowers should act. Every culture has death-related beliefs and customs that should be acknowledged, understood, and honored. Especially in the Zulu, Tswana, Sotho, and Pedi cultures, widows are prohibited from attending public events such as weddings or campaigns while in mourning (Ramukumba 2011). Furthermore, talking to a widow is frowned upon, particularly in her first year of mourning (Ramukumba 2011). In South Africa, widows' experiences and coping mechanisms may be influenced by other aspects of widowhood.

Widowhood-related cultural customs in South Africa might also present difficulties. Young widows may experience additional hardships from traditional widowhood rituals, such as stigmatization and social exclusion. These behaviors may make it more difficult for them to get help and start over after a loss (Shoko and Danke 2024). Social and religious expectations contribute to the maintenance of cultural norms and attitudes on widowhood. Kenen (2021) asserts that religious organizations have a significant impact on a widow's life.

The South African Constitution's Section 9, which declares that all people are equal before the law, protects widows and other women. This suggests that women must not face discrimination and must receive equal treatment (Mubangizi and Tlale 2023). However, according to Fasanmi and Ayivor 2021, the uniformity of women in policy frameworks does not seem to have aided widows' cause nationally or worldwide. Important documents like the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the Millennium Development Goals, and the Sustainable Development Goals, for example, do not mention widows (Fasanmi and Ayivor 2021). Furthermore, focusing on including widows in documents alone can be counterproductive because it can give a sense of action while real interventions at the grassroots may be lacking or even absent (Fasanmi and Ayivor 2021).

1.4. Mourning Rituals: The Broader African Context

Although widowhood customs are meant to honor the deceased in many African nations, they frequently result in abuse against women (Fasanmi and Ayivor 2021). Widows are socially repositioned through widowhood rites and rituals (Wekesa 2021). The goal is to allow things to return to normal. In some parts of Africa, widowhood is associated with various traditions intended to support the widow during this period of transition (Sulumba-Kapuma 2018). Sossou 2002 comes to the conclusion that certain cultures impose rigorous mourning ceremonies on widows, such as food limitations, dress standards to lessen their sexual attraction, and severe personal hygiene requirements. Many South

African communities still uphold their traditions, which make losing a spouse extremely painful for women (Mabunda and Ross 2023). Widows may experience marginalization, dehumanization, ostracism, subordination, and oppression because of these rituals. At first, widows react with shock and disbelief to shield themselves from the extreme anguish. Anger aimed at others and themselves may surface as they come to terms with the loss. During the last stage of mourning, widows progressively resume their regular activities and social interactions and take part in a variety of culture-specific rituals (Townsend 2015).

Certain gestures and words are part of mourning rituals in a particular setting to affirm cultural values (Brown et al. 2021). Shahin (2022) claims that these customs help the widow adjust to her new situation by giving her a sense of identity. The idea is that widowhood rites cut the connection between a deceased husband and his surviving wife and inspire the fortitude and bravery a widow needs to deal with a life of independence (Fasanmi and Ayivor 2021). Widows are forced to carry out these rituals to reclaim their status because of gender power disparities.

According to many accounts from around the globe, in-laws often strip widows of their property and inheritance rights after their husbands have passed away. In sub-Saharan Africa, the immediate or extended family of the deceased spouse often appropriates the widow's assets (Amoo et al. 2022). Property rights, especially the right to a house, ensure physical, mental, psychological, and emotional security, according to the World Health Organization (WHO 2005). Nonetheless, many Sub-Saharan African nations maintain discriminatory laws on inheritance and marital property.

1.5. Theoretical Framework: Intersectionality

This article adopts Kimberlé Crenshaw's 1989 intersectional perspective on the experiences of widowhood. The term "intersectionality" describes how a person's various identities—such as their color or ethnicity, gender, class, and sexual orientation—are interconnected and create barriers because they intersect (Simon et al. 2022). This approach helps to comprehend how discrimination and disadvantage are complex, varied issues.

By means of this paradigm, one comprehends how the experiences of young widows in South Africa are shaped by the interaction of several elements, including their age, socioeconomic level, and cultural background.

Intersectionality sheds light on the intricate interactions between the cultural, economic, social, and legal elements that influence the experiences of the five young South African widows in this case study.

Gender roles are tightly established in many Sub-Saharan African communities, and widowhood can make women feel even more marginalized (Ali et al. 2023). According to Makanga (2022), young widows not only experience social humiliation and a loss of prestige but also must contend with severe cultural customs (such as inheritance rules that favor male relatives and mourning rituals). The extent of their marginalization can be determined by investigating how gendered norms impact their chances, daily lives, and psychological health.

Widows often lose their deceased husbands' financial assistance. In societies where women have restricted access to jobs and no property rights, young widows are financially vulnerable. The experiences of younger widows are very different from those of older widows. For example, younger women have greater financial difficulties because they are less likely to get jobs and may have young children to support. They might also experience societal shame and pressure to marry again (Motsoeneng 2022), often in circumstances that are detrimental to their independence and general well-being. Examining the relationship between widowhood and widows' economic position might shed light on these women's survival tactics, such as taking on unpaid work, relying on extended family, or using community support systems.

Racial identity determines social experiences in South Africa. The relationship between widowhood and racial identity can affect social networks, institutional support, and

resource accessibility (Yang et al. 2024). How racial and ethnic dynamics impact young widows' opportunities and treatment must be thoroughly examined.

Inheritance laws have a significant impact on widows' access to assets and financial security. According to Makanga (2022), customary rules, poor legal knowledge, and high legal costs deny widows access to justice and the very laws designed to protect them. Discriminatory laws and practices frequently leave widows penniless. Makanga (2022) suggests that widows be educated in the laws that protect their rights, that social and economic initiatives be created to raise their standards of living, and that counseling services be offered to support their mental health. Examining the relationship between widowhood and institutional prejudices and legal systems reveals the obstacles to justice and the protection of young widows.

A thorough grasp of the difficulties experienced by young South African widows is possible with the application of intersectionality theory. By examining the interaction between gender, age, economic position, race, and legal variables, this framework offers a comprehensive understanding of the various forms of disadvantage they encounter in their daily lives. This method not only broadens our understanding but also helps us to develop inclusive policies and initiatives that benefit widows in similar contexts.

2. Methodology

This study adopted a case study methodology and qualitative research design to investigate the widowhood challenges faced by five young South African widows. According to Schoch (2020), the case study method involves a comprehensive examination of a current event within its life setting. These five case studies are part of a larger study focused on widowhood issues in South Africa.

We selected participants using purposive sampling from a broader sample in the aforementioned study. We purposefully chose the five widows after gathering demographic information about them, ensuring that they provided informed consent to participate upon understanding the study's purpose. We specifically selected five South African women who became widows before the age of 40. To capture a variety of experiences, we included widows from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

We collected data through semi-structured interviews, covering a wide range of topics related to widowhood, including the participants' emotional, cultural, social, and economic difficulties. Each widow provided vivid, first-hand accounts of her experiences and challenges. We conducted the interviews in the participants' homes to create a comfortable and familiar environment, facilitating open and honest dialogue. Each interview lasted 45 min and 1 h, allowing ample time for participants to share their thoughts and stories without feeling rushed. With the participants' consent, we audio-recorded all interviews to accurately capture the richness of their narratives for subsequent analysis. We transcribed the recordings verbatim to maintain the authenticity of the participants' voices. We designed the interview questions to be open-ended, encouraging participants to express their feelings and experiences in their own words. We employed follow-up questions as appropriate to explore specific themes that emerged during the discussions, aiming to uncover the nuanced realities faced by young widows and provide a comprehensive understanding of their challenges and resilience.

We subjected the interview data to thematic analysis, enabling a detailed study through transcription. We systematically coded the transcripts to identify noteworthy themes and trends related to widowhood issues. We categorized the codes into general topics that represent the widows' main concerns and life events. Using an intersectional lens, we analyzed how the participants' experiences were shaped by the intersections of various dimensions of identity, such as age, socioeconomic status, and cultural background. Their stories revealed that these overlapping identities influenced their coping strategies and ways of life.

The informed-consent process ensured that participants understood the study's objectives, the voluntary nature of their involvement, and their right to discontinue participation

at any time. We used pseudonyms and securely stored their data to protect their identities. Additionally, we informed participants about counseling and support options, recognizing that the study might evoke distress. The research team included psychologists to provide this support.

3. Results

3.1. Case Studies

3.1.1. Mary's Story

We were married in a community of property. We had six children. I was forty when my husband passed away. I had no job. He had a job. I only completed Standard 5. He went to live with his family after he became ill. Because I am illiterate, I was unintentionally forced to sign divorce documents. Since I was officially divorced, I was not permitted to wear the mourning dresses when he passed away. The in-laws did not provide me with any assistance before, during, or after the funeral. Our car was taken by one of the cousins, but I was able to keep the house. Because I had reported the in-laws to the police, I could keep the house.

3.1.2. Tebby's Story

I was married in a community of property. At the time of his passing, I was 37. Our family was blended because he had five children, and I had two children from a prior relationship. I'm a professional person. My sisters-in-law took my cars and properties away from me when he passed away. They put their names on one of the houses and the car. The family disputes prevented my widowhood ceremonies. I dressed in black. The only people who supported me were my friends, family, and churchmates. Soon after his death, I was diagnosed with high blood pressure. I haven't stopped fighting for my house yet.

3.1.3. Selly's Story

I was legally married in a community of property. We had two children when my husband died, and I was employed. He was a businessman. For three months, I was not allowed to have any form of entertainment. I was disoriented and could not concentrate properly. I received support from my in-laws, family members, and friends and I also found a community on TikTok. I developed high blood pressure, but I managed to get treatment from the hospital. However, I had to fight with my in-laws because, in one of the policies, my husband had named his sister. After all, at the time of his death, he was staying with her.

3.1.4. Mbali's Story

He was admitted to the hospital before he died, but his family discharged him and took him home, where he passed away without my knowing. Not a single person from his family stood with me at the funeral. The neighbors attending the funeral were encouraging but afterwards, things changed. These days, not even when food parcels are distributed, does anybody tell me about any community events. Currently, only one neighbor still encourages me. My blood pressure was already high when he passed away, but it got worse thereafter.

I received his pension. However, because the brother is one of the beneficiaries, I haven't been able to access his policy money until now. He claims he can't be in the same room as me, so he isn't cooperating so that we can go and claim the money. He could not get the money without my help. I also can't collect without him. I am having trouble paying a sizable bill for water and municipal rates that I received since the policy money is not being released. Additionally, I discovered that he had a bank loan that I was unaware of, and some of the pension funds were used to pay off this.

3.1.5. Wish's Story

I was part of a traditional monogamous marriage that produced four children. Following his passing, I used some traditional herbs to purify my blood, preventing illness in myself and the man, should I want to get into another relationship. Although my in-laws had expected me to wear the mourning garments for a year, I did so for only six months. They authorized me to wear it for six months. It is forbidden for me to visit others, so I stayed at home.

Even though going to work hurt so much, I had no choice since I had to provide for the children. I informed the family members attending the burial that we had worked hard to provide for our children and that they could not take anything from us. Those who were uncomfortable with what I said left the funeral, but some people stayed.

3.2. Analysis of Commonalities and Differences Among the Stories

The widows' stories show the varied realities of young widows in South Africa, encompassing both common and particular difficulties. Key similarities and differences between their stories are found in their experiences.

3.2.1. Similarities

After their husbands' deaths, all five women confront substantial financial and legal challenges. While Mbali struggles with the intricacies of obtaining her husband's pension since her brother-in-law would not cooperate, Mary and Selly deal with inheritance concerns and family conflicts over assets. Wish works, but she also has to support her kids by herself, which highlights the financial difficulty that frequently results from losing a partner. However, Tebby's sisters-in-law may have blatantly violated her legal rights by putting their names on a property and seizing her cars and belongings. This draws attention to a significant issue: the exploitation of women in family structures, particularly in situations where there may be a lack of knowledge and enforcement of the law. Her family disputes jeopardize her financial stability despite her professional employment, demonstrating how social and cultural factors can undermine agreements.

Each widow's sadness and related stress harm their health. Wish, Tebby, and Mbali have high blood pressure, which is made worse by their difficult emotional and financial situations. The necessity for integrated emotional and physical health support is highlighted by this commonality, which shows the toll widowhood may have on physical health.

All five of the women's stories depict a strong sense of social isolation. Every widow has major obstacles to receiving emotional assistance, whether it be from the loss of family support (as in the accounts of Tebby, Mary, and Mbali) or social interaction constraints imposed by culture (as Wish knew). This seclusion makes their grieving more difficult, underscoring the value of social ties.

All five women demonstrate tenacity and resolve to stand up for their rights and defend their families despite their obstacles. Their tales demonstrate a similar theme of agency in the face of hardship, whether it is Mary confronting her in-laws, Selly fighting for her benefits, Mbali overcoming legal obstacles, Wish outlining her family's rights at the burial, or Tebby demonstrating her will to keep fighting for her home. These battles represent a larger struggle against patriarchal and familial tyranny in addition to their wishes to safeguard their financial future.

3.2.2. Differences

Wish's tale is firmly anchored in customary grieving customs, which include particular cultural standards for dress and social behavior. The experiences of the other women, on the other hand, do not emphasize such cultural limitations, indicating that cultural context can have a substantial impact on the widow's experience and the expectations society places on her.

The women have different sources of support. Selly finds comfort in a TikTok community as well as in family, suggesting a combination of conventional and contemporary

support networks. On the other hand, Wish and Tebby depend mostly on a small group of friends and neighbors, and Mbali finds that her husband's family does not provide her with much assistance. This variation in support networks demonstrates how community dynamics can vary greatly, influencing the coping strategies used by each widow.

Wish, Tebby, and Selly have jobs, which suggests a degree of financial independence that affects their capacity to handle their circumstances. Mary, on the other hand, appears to be more economically susceptible because she is unemployed, albeit having some agency. This disparity demonstrates how a widow's ability to deal with the fallout from loss can be impacted by her financial security.

Grief and coping strategies are expressed differently by each widow. Whereas Selly's story focuses on taking care of her health and standing up for her rights, Mary's story highlights her battle with family and legal matters. While Wish strikes a balance between her grief and the duty of raising her children, Mbali's story emphasizes her intense sense of betrayal and loneliness. These diverse emotional reactions highlight how mourning is a personal experience and how people deal with loss in different ways.

Together, the experiences of Mary, Selly, Tebby, Mbali, and Wish paint a nuanced picture of young widows' unique situations as well as their common hardships. Throughout their stories, common themes of legal difficulties, health consequences, and fortitude surface, while variations in cultural customs, support networks, work status, and emotional reactions highlight the varied realities of widowhood. It is crucial to comprehend these similarities and variances to create all-encompassing support systems that cater to the particular requirements of widows in various settings.

4. Discussion

The five accounts above encapsulate the challenges many widows face in South Africa. They underscore the harsh realities concerning widowhood and property inheritance in sub-Saharan Africa. The findings highlighted several critical issues. Within their families and communities, the widows encountered harmful social and cultural practices, taboos, and regulations regarding widowhood. Widowhood rites and practices are believed to help the widow and to show respect for her deceased husband. They are supposed to sustain the health of the widow and maintain the communal identity and viability (Manala 2015). Egharevba and Oboite (2024) maintain that African widowhood rites are viewed as obligatory protocols to help a grieving spouse transition into the state of widowhood. Nonetheless, Mary and Tebby indicated that they were not allowed to perform the widowhood rites because of the tension between them and their in-laws. The widowhood rites were important to Mary and Tebby, and being denied the opportunity to practice them was a painful experience. According to Mabunda and Ross (2023), widows believed that cultural practices needed to be respected to appease their ancestors. These claims support Wish's idea that the rites were required to purify her blood so that she would be ready for relationships in the future. It is not that South African women are against mourning customs; in fact, they recognize the various customs that women uphold before, during, and after the loss of a loved one (Fasanmi and Ayivor 2021).

To attain the widowhood identity and perform widowhood rites in Africa, three forms of marriage are considered acceptable: cohabitation, customary or traditional marriage, and ordinance marriage (Sossou 2002). In debates on the plight of widows, it is essential to comprehend the meaning of "marriage" as a legal entry to the widow identity and eligibility to perform the widowhood rite (Fasanmi and Ayivor 2021). Mary was, however, not allowed to perform the rites because she was "divorced." Selly, on the other hand, was allowed to perform the widowhood rites on condition that she stayed at home for three months. She indicated that, during this period, she felt disoriented and lacked concentration. According to Sabri et al. (2016), isolation and humiliation often characterize the narratives of widows living in developing countries. Isolation and humiliation may lead to depression. Bharathi et al. (2015) note that depression is a common mental problem among widows and is often the result of loneliness. Tebby and Mbali complained of high

blood pressure, and Selly reported that she felt bewildered. All the participants in the case study indicated that their loss had an impact on their health. Lonely widows suffering from depression should not be discouraged from socializing. However, isolation and marginalization can stem from a widow's efforts to keep her husband's memory alive, which can continue to exert control over her life (Shahnazarian and Ziemer 2018).

According to their narratives, the widows were dispossessed during their mourning period. Their in-laws deprived Mary and Tebby of their possessions, which demonstrates the extent to which in-laws' greed can blind them to the needs of the deceased's young children. To prevent her from receiving the insurance policy payout, Mbali's brother-in-law refused to accompany her. This demonstrates what relatives are capable of to cause trouble for a widow. Before her in-laws could take her property, Wish had to make it plain that she would not allow anyone to remove her possessions. This demonstrates how crucial it is that widows know their rights and feel powerful. Her warning dissuaded those with malicious intent. Moreover, the type of marriage determines access to relationships and resources (human, material, and emotional), which are essential to thrive after the husband's demise (Fasanmi and Ayivor 2021). However, to be mistreated by the very same people she views as her support system is devastating for a widow.

A study by Standridge et al. (2022) indicates that participants often seek out social groups and leisure activities for distraction, companionship, and support based on their changing needs. Selly commented that she joined a community on TikTok as a way of coping with her loss. South African women actively eliminating widowhood's negative connotations demonstrates that customs can change and that women can take on leadership positions in their communities. Wish's bravery in negotiating a shortened mourning period with her in-laws serves as an example. She asserted her rights and stated that the property belonged to the kids and could not be seized or divided. By adopting an African womanist perspective that embodies solidarity and communalism, and by converting harmful widowhood customs into positive ones, communities can make life more bearable for widows (Fasanmi and Ayivor 2021).

On the one hand, it seems that policy frameworks have not aided the cause of widows on a national or international level. For example, widows are not mentioned in major publications such as the Sustainable Development Goals, the Millennium Development Goals, and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action of 1995 (Fasanmi and Ayivor 2021). In addition, working with community stakeholders to comprehend, evaluate, and create solutions that meet these goals is a crucial part of resolving widows' problems in Africa (Fasanmi and Ayivor 2021).

The five participants were married in a community of property, which gave them an equal share in their husband's estates. Their right to an equal share was violated when their in-laws forcibly took possession of their assets. Their narratives highlight the intersection of age and culture because their in-laws used culture to take advantage of the widows' age. Mary's illiteracy was exploited to cheat her into signing divorce papers. Not only illiterate widows are ill-treated. Even educated and professional widows can be treated unfairly, as Tebby's case illustrates. The participants were less concerned about the cultural rites and more about the dispossession of the assets acquired during their marriage, which were supposed to benefit them and their children.

South African widows need to understand the cultural background of widowhood and mourning. Such knowledge will help them to live up to the protective norms consistent with their beliefs and to bargain with elders and other community members. Acknowledging positive customs such as the rites that help them fit in with families and expand their support system can help in the mourning process.

5. Conclusions

The loss of a spouse not only leads to insecurity and depression but also renders widows vulnerable in the face of strained family relationships. In South Africa, widows frequently face social marginalization owing to stigma and loneliness. The stress caused by

cultural customs is exacerbated by a lack of community and family support. Communities' views about widows' mourning and cultural observance differ. Some communities give their full support, whereas others maintain discriminatory mourning laws to the detriment of widows.

5.1. Implications for Practice

Widows who have a strong social support network find it easier to manage difficult situations. They value the help they receive from others. As they adjust to their new reality, widows can talk about feelings and receive input from others.

Widow-empowering skills should be taught so that widows can organize community support when they are in mourning. Issues such as communities' willingness to modify cultural customs regarding widowhood and grieving, discussed in this article should be further investigated in literature and research.

Recommendations to assist widows during their time of grieving ought to include support networks through community mobilization. To address difficulties such as wrongfully holding widows responsible for their husbands' deaths, mediation between widows and their in-laws with the involvement of the widow's family is recommended. Religious organizations can help to not only resolve conflict between widows and their in-laws but also educate their congregations about sorrow and mourning and align their beliefs about death with religious principles.

5.2. Implications for Policy

Based on the results, important legislative changes should be made to enhance the widows' emotional, legal, and financial well-being. The main goal of the policy should be to improve widows' legal protections, especially concerning inheritance and property rights. To assist widows in navigating complicated legal systems, legal aid programs designed especially for them should be formed.

5.3. Future Research

Apart from empowerment programs such as workshops and vocational training, further research is required to determine practical approaches to support widows in circumstances akin to those of the young widows in the case studies.

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