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Widowhood and associated risks in under-resourced communities: A Social Work Perspective

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Abstract. The perpetual growth in the population of widows globally signals the need for systematic research and interrogation of the phenomenon of widowhood. Under-resourced communities have been side-lined from imperative investigations and systematic documentation to inform practice. This article discusses the risks associated with widowhood in under-resourced communities of Binga District in Zimbabwe. Following a qualitative research approach and a phenomenological research design, purposive sampling was employed to engage ten widows in one-on-one in-depth interviews. Data were analysed thematically and backed up by existing literature to provide thick descriptions. The findings of the study indicated that widows were exposed to an arsenal of health, psychological, social and economic risks. Many of the risks associated with widowhood are exacerbated by lack of supportive environments and provision of conducive environment to trigger proper adaptation mechanism especially among the young widows in under-resourced communities. The conclusions reached were that widowhood risk factors continue to increase among widows in under-resourced communities impacting negatively on optimal living and adaptation with the widows' circumstances.

Keywords. widowhood, risks, adaptation, under-resourced communities, Binga District

1. Introduction

Globally, there are numerous reasons and situations that cause widowhood and place strain on coping abilities of the widowed women. Wars, genocides pandemic illnesses and diseases have practically induced an increase in the number of widows across the world more especially in under-resourced communities (Onofrio & Ibrahim-leathers, 2020; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2020). In general terms, widowhood is a phenomenon that relates to married couples. However, the definition of a widow has been extended by some countries due to high incidences of cohabitation, civil unions and partnerships, to mean those who have survived without their long term partners due to death (Chamie, 2021). It is also a fact that widowhood is a phenomenon both in the developed and developing countries with men and women impacted differently.

Analysing from a statistical perspective, the number of widowed persons globally stands approximately at 350 million people Chamie, 2021). Research has revealed that of the 350 million widowed persons, approximately 248 million are women, depicting the higher numbers of widows than widowers in the world (United Nations (UN) Women, 2021). In Africa, one in ten women of 15 years and older are said to be widowed (Djuikom & van de Walle, 2018).

Literature has shown that there are various risks associated with widowhood in African contexts without formidable and sustainable recourse to redress the widows' plights. In the instance of widowhood, there is a great deal of qualitative and anecdotal evidence of social stigma, property grabbing, forced displacement, denial of child custody, degrading widowhood rites, and allegations of having caused the death (Djuikom & van de Walle, 2018). In under-resourced communities, widows often experience perceived lack of social support that may exacerbate the emotional pain of an unexpected loss to the partner. Many of the ordeals experienced by widows in under-resourced communities miss the elements of enabling positive adjustments to widowhood and rather catalyse poor adjustment mechanisms. Making sense of the loss is a crucial coping tool which widows do not have an opportunity to experience.

More crucially, the majority of research have found that widowhood is largely experienced by younger women in under-resourced communities of the developing countries, many of whom are still young themselves but widowed and raising their own children (Birech, 2019; Kebede & Zeleke, 2019; Ude & Njioku, 2017). Most of the research done was on older widows and little has been researched on young widows and ways of coping with the phenomenon of widowhood (Jones, Oka, Clark, Gardner, Hunt & Dutson, 2019).

2. Problem statement

Widows' control over their own lives in under-resourced communities is problematic. Protective factors for the improvement of their lives after the death of their husbands have been found to be highly turbulent with psychosocial and socioeconomic risks being a common phenomenon (Djuikom & van de Walle, 2018). At psychosocial level, widows are prone to immense stress, depression, stigma, child custody battles and demeaning widowhood rites (Li & Lin, 2019). They are also faced with socioeconomic struggles when they encounter property and land disinheritance which was mainly accrued through marriage. Most African women in under-resourced communities acquire economic resources through marriage and property disinheritance adds to the risk of economic resources dwindling. Besides psychosocial and socioeconomic wellbeing being at risk, widowhood also amplifies health risks for widowed women in under-resourced communities (Sekgobela, Peu & van der Wath, 2018). More so, there has been a growing concern over the increasing number of young widows in under-resourced communities such as Binga District in Zimbabwe which precipitates a higher number of risks associated with young widows (Birech, 2019). In Zimbabwe, for example, many widows are in insecure customary marriages, accounting for approximately 80%, exposing them to property grabbing and expulsion upon the incident of widowhood (Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), 2021). Widows in Binga District account for 8.3% of the total population of widows in the province of Matabeleland North of 749,017 with widows making up 15% and widowers 2%. This mathematically indicates that other eight districts in Matabeleland North Province share 6,7% of the total percentage population of the widows (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency (Zimstas), 2012). This prompted this study to investigate the risks associated with widows in under-resourced communities and the struggles in coping with widowhood for women.

3. Aim and objectives of the study

The aim of the study was to examine the risks associated with widowhood in the Binga District in Zimbabwe. The objective was to describe the risks in relation to the environment onto which the risks of widowhood are germane. This enabled an understanding of the extent

to which widows can rebound from the adversity of widowhood and possible blockages to the adaptation process.

4. Research methods and materials

The widows' experiences were captured in in-depth descriptions of the risks of widowhood using a qualitative research approach and phenomenological research design (Hennink, Hunter, & Baily, 2011). This was the approach and design to enable widows to express themselves introspectively and provide detailed information of their experiences (Padgett, 2017). According to Braun and Clarke (2013), when applied correctly, the qualitative method offers rich descriptions and complexities that characterize the widows' real life experiences which is consistent with the objectives of this study.

4.1 Population of the study

In the study, the population comprised of widows who had lived experiences of risks associated with widowhood in Binga District. The population in the study refers to “only those cases that theoretically might be selected as research participants, those who are potentially accessible to the researcher...” (Yegidis, Weinbach & Myers, 2012:195). According to the 2012 census, there were 75 356 females in Zimbabwe (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency, (Zimstats), 2012). In Binga District, 8.3 percent of the female population was widowed. This is significant and justifying an investigation into the phenomenon of widowhood.

4.2 Sampling method

This study employed homogeneous purposive sampling strategy to conduct in-depth interviews with ten widows. This was the most effective sampling approach to ensure that only widows participated in the study. According to Padgett (2017), homogeneous purposive sampling involves selecting respondents based on their shared experience and capacity to offer needed data. Despite the fact that the study's intended number of participants was fifteen, data saturation occurred at 10 individuals, (Padgett, 2017, Yedidis et al, 2012, Whittaker, 2012), thus 10 widows participated in this study.

4.3 Data collection method

To collect data, in-depth semi-structured interviews (Hennink et al., 2011) were used with an interview schedule as an instrument and questions created on pertinent thematic and subject areas. Ten widows were interviewed for the study and sufficed data saturation during data collection. The widows shared their lived experiences of risks associated with in their daily lives.

4.4 Data analysis

Data were analysed using thematic data analysis, (Whittaker, 2012), which involved listening to audio recorded interviews on specific themes and then transcribing them verbatim such that the content was not lost. Pragmatically, the widows' data were analysed for parallels and differences, and meaning was created by comparing and contrasting it. Data analysis, according to Hardwick and Worsely (2011), is "the act of imparting order, structure, and meaning" to massive amounts of data gathered by the researcher. The data was then textually presented according to specified themes, with emerging themes analysed, compared and supported by existing literature.

4.4 Ethical considerations

The issue of risks and coping strategies of widows can be emotionally trying. As a result, it was appropriate for the researchers in this study to pay attention to ethical considerations. The researcher obtained ethical clearance to conduct the study from Higher Degrees Committee of the University. Then, to minimise labelling and victimisation during the data collection process, the researcher had to ensure that the participants remained anonymous (Hennink et al., 2011). In order to do this, the participants' identifying information could not be elicited. Pseudonyms were also employed instead of the individuals' true names in the study (Denscombe, 2014). The researcher also made certain that participation was fully voluntary, and that participants were informed that they might withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

5. Discussion of findings

The section that follows provides a discussion of the findings regarding the health, psychological, social and economic risks associated with widowhood in under-resourced community of Binga District. The findings are thematically discussed and juxtaposed to the existing literature to provide a critical and analytical approach to the findings.

5.1 Health risks

The study sought to find out the health risks associated with widowhood in the under-resourced Binga District communities. The findings from the widows' own experiences of their own health was saddening. They experienced health problems emanating from the experience of widowhood. The majority (7 of 10) participants highlighted health risks and problems associated with being a widow. Some participants had this to say:

“My health has been disturbed as well. At times I feel that my heart is tired. I will say that, IF I THINK ABOUT IT, IT GIVES ME HEART PROBLEMS”, (Braitha).

“Health wise, I am not very strong since my husband died a long time ago. I need to know how to survive with the virus so that life can continue. I need to see my children grow up. I need knowledge on survival skills”, (Nomai).

“At times the problem I have with my health is backache. It can take me a month in pain and unable to move. I do not have money to go to the hospital. I survive through PRAYERS (emphasized) from my church until I feel better”, (Mary).

“As far as my health is concerned, I do not know whether it was due to the death of my husband, I developed asthma. From that time, I take tablets and I use the inhaler. Due to this problem, I need to be able to access these drugs with these rising medical costs”, (Nancy).

Drawing from the findings of the study, it is clear that widowhood is associated with health risks. Some widows from many communities are infected with HIV/AIDS while others' health deteriorate due to the depressive and stressful situations of their lives. Health care in under-resources communities is generally substandard and widows' health needs are usually not met. The rising costs of seeking proper health care and generally negative attitudes of health care providers towards widows have dampened their efforts to solicit proper health care. Some

widows have even resorted to seeking prayers as a strategy to mitigate the pains associated with widowhood. In support of the findings, studies have found that bereavement have a negative impact on health and general health care for widows in poorly resourced areas and health support lacks to a greater extent (Li & Lin, 2018; Sekgobela et al, 2018). Further, research established that a link exists between widowhood and associated losses and reduction in immunity system response to diseases therefore increasing health risks for widowed women (Wu, Brown, Chirinos, Chen, de Dios, Taylor, Butner, Heijnen& Fagundes, 2021).

5.2 Psychological risks

Psychological risks are synonymous with widowhood. The study sought to find out the psychological risks associated with widowhood in Binga District. The phenomenon of widowhood puts widows under intense psychological strain and emotional drain for most of their life courses after the death of their husbands. In the study, all the ten participants described the psychological risks associated with their experience of widowhood. From the data collected from the participants, this is what some participants had to say:

“The form of empowerment I need most is psychological. I need help from people with expertise so that I can have minimal psychological pain”, (Nomia).

“Psychologically, we need counseling with my children so that the impact of the death of my husband can be minimized”, (Nomai).

“I think I need help from other people especially on the ever troubling thoughts of educating my children. I feel counseling on this one will lower my thoughts because my children’s education troubles me very much. I ask myself several questions some of which I cannot answer”, (Mary).

“I have psychological instability as well. This is brought about by ever bombarding thoughts of how to manage the diet, medication and money for my daughter’s education. These criss-cross in my mind and give me to psychological. I think I need counselling here”, (Chipo).

“I really need help since the just recent death of my husband. I always think about it but only learned people know how they can assist a person like me to get over the problem”, (Zamani).

The existence of psychological risks once a woman is widowed cannot be overemphasised. As such, the widows expressed the need for psychological support which are usually lacking in the under-resourced communities. This then has implications on the adaptation process to the experience of widowhood as meagre psychological support reduces drastically the available options and coping strategies and hence trigger prolonged states of reliving the experience of the losses and complicated grief for the widows (Dabergott, 2021). The lack of services always creates uncertainties among widows on how to handle the psychological issues creating more latent emotional and psychological problems such as anxiety and depression which can stretch way longer after being widowed (Witting, Lambert, Johnson, Goodkin, & Wickrama, 2020).

5.3 Social risks

There was a need for the study to establish the social risks associated with widowhood. This is for fact that human beings are social beings and enjoy the social support of meaningful

mingling with other fellow human beings as drawn from the work of Aristotle the philosopher (Sukel, 2019). In the event that a woman is widowed social changes are established and this study sought to find out the social risks that re-arrange beneficial social engagements of widows in under-resourced communities. From the verbatim responses of the participants of the study, these responses were recorded:

“...people stigmatize for being a widow and this has reduced my self-esteem. This is perhaps more exacerbated by the fact that they took everything and I remained with nothing. If possible, I need people to help me to get back the property so that I can regain my esteem”, (Sophia).

“I need help in bringing us (herself and husband’s relatives) to understanding terms. We need to work together we need to talk and agree on what needs to be done. There is need for co-operation”, (Chipo).

“I find difficulties in mixing with married people. Some of them knew me when I was at school and a young girl. They do not know about my marriage life. Due to that, they disbelieve that I had a civil marriage and then stigmatize me for being single”, (Braitha).

At interactional level, being a widow is associated with risks of losing friends, companions and meaningful engagements with significant people in the community of domicile. It increases the risks of isolation as the widow loses the husband to start with and then the loss multiplies to losing other significant people in the social circles such as childhood friends and the late husband’s relatives. They are distressed by the loss of personal contact and human interaction, and as a result, they retreat and become unresponsive. Research has established that such loss of important social circles is associated with stigma which rests on the premise that a widow is associated with the spirit of the dead person and such association influences social isolation and extended periods of seclusion (Sapkota, 2019; The London School of Economic and Political Sciences, 2021; Van De Walle, 2016).

Many risks are also associated with harmful cultural practices that contradict the human rights of widows in the under-resourced communities. Demeaning and degrading cultural practices anchored on patriarchal mind-sets are synonymous with the lives of widows in under-resourced communities (Sapkota, 2019; Van De Walle, 2016). In many instances in these communities, widowhood is both a personal and social status. Cultural and religious practices hold much weight and respect to concretise a widow’s stigmatisation and dwindling of personal and human rights. A male gives social and prestigious status on a married woman from the view a patriarchal set up of the communities. As a result, the death and absence of a husband, opens precarious avenues for social risks of harmful practices such as widow cleansing and forced levirate marriages (The London School of Economic and Political Sciences, 2021).

With regards to social risks associated with cultural practices in Binga District, some participants expressed the following in the interviews:

“When the burial was over, the young brother to my husband wanted to marry me ((meaning levirate marriage)). His wife was very bitter about it and refused that this should happen. That is when the relationship we had got sour. The children were left for me to support them.”, (Choolwe).

“This all emanated from the fact that the brother to my husband wanted to marry me and I refused to do so. When I refused to marry him that’s when he ordered me to go with all my children and leave the home”, (Anna).

“The problem came when it came to the traditional marriage of the widow as we do it in Tonga tradition after the funeral. I refused and also the other wife refused to get married to the brother to our late husband. They then punished us by not cleansing us”, (Nancy).

Levirate marriage quagmires arise from the fact that most widows in the Southern African region are young and of marriage age. The cultural dictates are that the young widow should remain within the family and a relative of the deceased husband should marry her with the idea of taking care of the widow and her children and fulfilment of cultural obligations as well as preventing exogamous marriages. This has fuelled the risk of spreading HIV/AIDS and social conflicts between the widows and the in-laws and other women married to the *levir* (the dead husband’s brother of the widow).

5.4 Economic risks

Economic risks are particularly felt and visible among widowed women in under-resourced communities. Most women in under-resourced communities rely on their husbands for economic sustenance and the death of their husbands opens a chapter of enduring economic risks and poor safety nets (Djuikom & van de Walle, 2018). Patriarchal societies’ economic distribution favours accrual of economic resources in the hands of males (Hsiao, Lee, Yeh, Tai, Lee, 2021). Under-resourced communities experience even extreme circumstances where women are entirely dependent on men for economic needs making them more vulnerable upon the death of their husbands. When women participate in economic activities, it is usually substance farming and vending enabling meagre hand-to-mouth economic participatory activities.

Sustainable economic bases and investments are normally lost upon the death of the widows’ husbands to the in-laws who purposely grab the property and leaves the widows without any meaning sources for economic sustenance. The relatives of the deceased husband normally order the widow to leave, even the land which she owned to grow crops for food is grabbed. The verbatim responses revealed the following in the study:

“A-a-a-a!, Immediately after his death and whilst I was still mourning his death, they (relatives of the husband) demanded household items that we had BEFORE HE WAS EVEN BURIED (adding emphasis). He was buried on Sunday and on Tuesday, they wanted the cow which I bought myself from the money I got from growing cotton”, (Choolwe).

“When he died his relatives sold all the cattle. I tried to complain about it because he had written down on a small paper that the property belonged to the children. He had also stated that his parents got their shares before he died so that was no reason for them to interfere anymore. When the parents heard about it, they refused that that does not work”, (Zamani).

“When my husband died, they (relatives of the husband) grabbed ALL the property and ordered me to leave the home. This caused a big problem because I am an orphan, my parents had died a long time ago. I had nowhere to go with my very young children. The other problem that I encountered was that of the land that was taken away from us”, (Sphia).

6. Conclusions and recommendations

In lieu of the findings of the study, it can be concluded that widowhood in under-resourced communities presents an arsenal of risks ranging from health, psychological, social and economic risks. Health, psychological, social and economic resources are pertinent to human survival yet for widows these important components of human life are embedded with uncertainties and afflictions.

The study found that widows suffer from various health issues with little help to meet their health needs. This is amplified by minimal resources in under-resourced communities from both service providers such as inaccessibility of health facilities and poorly resourced health facilities that cannot meet the health needs of the widows. Many of these widows are infected with HIV/AIDS and need medication which is mostly unavailable. The health professionals also seem to be less helpful as they either stigmatise the widows or do not have needed medical supplies to dispense for the health needs of the widows. It is recommended therefore that under-resourced communities receive deliberate government support in conjunction with non-governmental organisations (NGO)' support (Mandinyenya & Nyandoro, 2017; ZimFact, 2021). However, this kind of health support should be informed by research and evidence-based. The support from government alone or the NGO support cannot suffice to meet the health needs of the widows as governments in most of these areas may not have enough resources and need supplemental resources from the NGO sector.

Further, the study found psychological risks to be associated with widowhood in under-resourced communities. Loss and grief, which are mostly complicated, associated with widowhood have been found to be immense and widows undergo psychological turmoil after the death of their husbands without professional help. Needed support to adapt to widowhood and the new challenges of their lives are meagre or non-existent with more environmental stressors forcing widows to relive their experiences of losses. To ameliorate the psychological risks of widowhood, psychological support is recommended from the grassroots level. From an under-resourced community level perspective, it would be more helpful if Home and Community Based Care Givers are professionally trained, (Zikhathile & Atagana, 2018), to provide emotional support to the widows and refer those that have complicated psychological problems to highly trained psychologists. Again it would be beneficial if mobile psychological services could be provided to the widows in these under-resourced communities as these services are mainly accessible in major cities where widows cannot access them.

Social risks also present to be a problem for widows in their areas of domicile. From of these risks emanate from cultural practices that are oppressive to the widows. Its envisaged that social capital is cardinal and needs to be tapped for sustainable interventions in the social setting in under-resourced communities. Chiefs and village heads who are the custodians of culture and authority need to be trained for progressive paradigm shifts towards helpful intervention approaches to meet the social needs of the widows (Chigwata, 2016; Ndoma, 2021). They need to be assisted with organised deliberate training towards human rights approaches and realign their traditional interventions towards helpful interventions. A proper referral system is recommended among few service providers in under-resourced communities to ensure that social services, at the minimal, can be properly coordinated.

Mostly, widows are exposed to many economic risks in under-resourced communities. The death of their husbands means loss of sole providers to the families and reduces drastically their sources of income. This is basically due to the fact that many women in under-resourced communities, happen to be housewives and not functionally employed to provide financial support for their families.

Further, widows in many under-resourced communities in Zimbabwe survive on subsistence farming and upon the death of their husbands, land is grabbed by in-laws who normally would have allocated the land before the death of the husband. Upon the death of the widow's husband, land is taken away as ownership is patrilineal. This further reduces the prospect of producing food for the lonely widow's family. Further, there is the risk of property grabbing which further reduces economic resources needed by the widows (Dube, 2016).

It is recommended however, that widows be trained in income generating projects to boost economic resources. The government together with help of the NGO sector need to build economic safety nets which are generally lacking in under-resourced communities (Djuikom, & van de Walle, 2018). Further, married couples should be encouraged write wills with the help of legal professionals to safeguard their land and property from grabbing.

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