

Challenges of Widowhood Extend to Childcare

Subjects: Social Work

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Unless widows recount their painful experiences of caring for their children, their day-to-day lived challenges of childcare may be misunderstood if not totally missed by social workers in practice. The widespread and global phenomenon of widowhood warrants international recognition and aggressive scholarship to create resounding comprehension for proper and deliberate practical interventions. The phenomenon of widowhood cannot be localised to certain geographical settings or racial, ethnic or religious groups as widowhood cuts across all social groupings and stratifications and, as such, has been described as one of the epidemics in the world.

Keywords: widows ; childcare ; challenges

1. Introduction

Statistically, the number of widowed people worldwide is estimated to be over 350 million ([Chamie 2021](#)). According to research, roughly 248 million of the 350 million widowed people are women, indicating that there are more widows than widowers in the world ([United Nations \(UN\) Women 2021](#)). The global number of children of widows stood at 584 million in 2015 ([The Loomba Foundation 2015](#)). In Africa, one out of every ten women aged 15 years and up is considered to be widowed ([Djuikom and van de Walle 2018](#)). In Zimbabwe, 9.06% of the widows were between 15 and 49 years of age ([Dube 2016](#)). There is a need to understand that the existence of teenage widows in the African context has implications for developmental issues as they themselves still need parental care, adding to the intense strain they experience ([Watson 2019](#)).

Research has established that there are many challenges of widowhood that need professional social work intervention in preserving the widow's individual dignity and self-respect as a human being as well as meeting personal needs and the needs for raising children ([Cummins et al. 2012](#); [Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman 2013](#)). Professional social workers have a responsibility and obligation to guarantee that social justice is distributed to marginalised and underprivileged widows and their children ([DuBois and Miley 2014](#)). The pain experienced by widows after failing to meet various pressing needs of their orphaned children deserves more attention and results in dire psychosocial implications for the widows and their children. This is a social problem that social workers, in practice, aim to prevent ([Mohinuddin 2017](#)). As a result, there is a need to confront and reform the system so that widows can experience desirable and optimal social functioning. Social work should move away from a status quo service-oriented strategy and toward a change-oriented development approach.

The growing body of knowledge and research studies have, however, articulated the bereavement, grief and loss experiences of the widows upon the death of their husbands, ([Bennett and Soulsby 2012](#); [Dunn 2015](#); [Mburugu 2020](#); [Ndabarushimana and Dushime 2018](#)) and have paid little attention to the lonely experience of caring for their children. This has also been overlooked by social workers in practice and yet a very significant focus area and a practice mandate ([DuBois and Miley 2014](#)). Widows from low-resourced communities of the developing world experience worse-off circumstances in caring for their children as they are prone to poverty and oppressive cultural practices and are less likely to solicit deserved professional interventions ([Dube 2021](#)). This is a critical condition that as a gap that should be closed by discussing considerations for social workers in practice in order to ameliorate the struggles experienced by widows in their single-handedly efforts of caring for their children.

Firstly, what challenges do widows experience when raising their children in the Binga District? Secondly, what do social workers need to consider during intervention efforts with challenges experienced by widows when caring for their children? These questions emanate from the view that widows in low-resourced communities such as the Binga District are burdened and disregarded in many ways and that professional social workers are obligated and compelled to ensure that social justice is distributed to the marginalised and disenfranchised communities, as well as their orphaned children ([DuBois and Miley 2014](#)).

Conceptual Clarity and Discourses on Widowhood

Many social problems have sufficient literature in social work; yet, widowhood has received little attention. The discourses on widowhood take two central viewpoints. One viewpoint discusses widowhood from the standpoint of human development. To this end, [Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman \(2013\)](#) note that widowhood frequently occurs in old age, with loneliness and melancholy being prevalent obstacles. The human developmental discourses on widowhood have considered widowhood as a normal human development curve in which a partner dies at some time in a woman's old age, leaving her widowed as part of the human development path. This contrasts with the occurrence of widowhood in Africa, where many widows are young and face a variety of social issues, including childcare, their personal developmental issues as young people, discrimination and oppression ([Dube 2019](#)). The developmental path to understanding widowhood should be further advanced to sufficiently contextualise and understand widowhood occurring at younger ages. This is because the individual problems of young widows are most likely to take different dimensions as opposed to those of older widows.

Another discourse on widowhood stems from a social justice perspective in which widowhood is seen as an injustice, which bemoans viewing widows as second-class citizens after the death of their husbands. This perspective questions why widows are treated differently, especially in oppressive communities, as they are treated as dirty, in need of cleansing and generally excluded from many community and religious engagements. These biases exclude widows from many socioeconomic amenities detrimental to their own personal care and caring and meeting the needs of their children. The argument posits that communities where widows reside are advancing a new social injustice called "widowism", which is a direct offshoot of "sexism". This is because widowers receive better treatment as opposed to widows. Therefore "widowism" is a new social injustice denoting ill-treatment and exclusion of widows from mainstream socioeconomic and community activities. In Nepal, for example, [Dube \(2016, p. 9\)](#) described widows as "physically alive and socially dead" in that they are secluded from many social and economic circles and are barely visible in claiming their rights, including custody of their children.

2. Widows' Childcare Challenges and Essential Considerations for Social Work Practice

This age gap signifies that widowhood cuts across all ages ([Dube 2016](#)). This is despite the fact that widowhood was associated with older women in the earlier days as compared to the new trends, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, where young widows are a growing phenomenon ([Van de Walle 2011](#)). Even though the ages of the widows may vary, there are typical struggles across all ages of widows, which range from lack of support, prejudices, economic insecurity and reduced social statuses ([United Nations \(UN\) Women 2021](#)). When older widows recounted their experiences, there were similarities with younger widows on the experiences of caring for their children, signifying that the struggles of widowhood are intergenerational.

In lieu of the research findings, widows in Binga District have struggled to meet the physiological, psychological, economic and educational needs of their children. These needs form integral parts of a holistic approach to the needs of children for survival.

Allowing children to reach their full developmental potential is both a human right and a necessary condition for long-term growth. Research in child development has proved the importance of meeting the necessary needs for optimal child development, which many of the widows' children lack in low-resourced communities. The [World Health Organisation \(WHO\)](#) (2020) has argued that providing necessary developmental conditions for children facilitates their health, nourishment, security, and safety, as well as responsiveness. Providing needed care and providing opportunities for their children are the everlasting and stressful thoughts for the widows ([Dube 2016](#)).

The widows' children have unfortunately befallen short of the needs they require for optimal development. Apart from the loss of their fathers and torment of their mothers after the death of their fathers, their own development is hijacked and marred with practical involuntary circumstantial interruptions.

In this regard, social work interventions should be deliberate, embrace and facilitate compassionate interactions and relationships in well-planned programmes that promote health and appropriate nutrition, shield widows' children from risks, and provide optimal conditions for the children's development. Social workers' planned interventions should also offer guidance on which children and widows can access services they are rightfully entitled to have. This is in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals ([United Nations 2021](#)).

Furthermore, it is suggested that social work intervention adopt a holistic approach to the widows' needs in collaboration with other stakeholders to mobilise needed resources and interventional networks needed by the widows and their children. Many of the low-resourced communities require a multi-sectoral approach to accrue enough resources for sound interventions. These interventions can also be carried out at the micro level and mezzo levels (Dube 2021; Shulman 2012). This will ensure that all aspects of both the widow and their children's needs, including socioeconomic, spiritual, psychosocial, and legal needs, are met, with a focus on a viable referral system that connects widows to well-trained interventionists who are equipped with contemporary human rights paradigms and practices to match current and global intervention trends.

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