

Socio-Economic Challenges Experienced by Widows and Support Provided by Social Workers in Raymond Mhlaba Local Municipality in Eastern Cape, South Africa

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Abstract

Widowed women, or widows, across the globe share common experiences which relate to social and economic challenges. For example, in some parts of Africa, widowhood comes as an elevated experience of deprivation, subjugation and humiliation. Widows are not only viewed with suspicion, but are also regarded as an economic burden on their relatives, especially if they are not working. This article reports on a study that aimed to investigate the impact of socio-economic support provided by social workers to widows in mitigating social and economic challenges. A qualitative approach was adopted for the study. The study sample comprised 20 widows and 15 social workers. The findings revealed that widows experience various socio-economic challenges. The study also found that while social workers provide services that are necessary for all South Africans, they do not offer any specific services directed to widows. In conclusion, the situation in which widows find themselves calls for more holistic interventions from social workers as they respond to the challenges that affect widows' well-being and functioning.

Keywords: socio-economic status; experiences; widows; support; widowhood; social workers

UNISA 

Southern African Journal of Social Work and Social Development

<https://unisapressjournals.co.za/index.php/SWPR>

Volume 35 | Number 3 | 2023 | #11179 | 21 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/2708-9355/11179>

ISSN 2708-9355 (Online)

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Background

Widowhood is a worldwide phenomenon and widows make up approximately 16% of the adult female population although the figure could be higher in some parts of the world (Dube 2016). In the developed world, the phenomenon of widowhood is mostly experienced by women older than 60 years, while in contrast, developing nations have seen an increase in the number of young widows from 15 years of age (Dabergott 2021). Child marriages result from poverty and oppressive cultural values (Centre for Human Rights 2018) and they are making such cases of early widowhood a human rights and intervention issue for humanitarian organisations, including the United Nations (Mashiri 2013). Humanitarian agencies argue that this is a violation of the rights of girls, including their proper development, health and education (Human Rights Watch 2015; Mwandayi and Chirongoma 2020). In South Africa, for every 100 women, 50% report the loss of a spouse daily, which sometimes means the loss of financial support. The death of a spouse is regarded as a traumatic life experience that causes stress (De Leo et al. 2020). Hancox et al. (2015) define a widow as a woman who has lost her spouse by death and will not marry again. Further, women respond differently to the death of their spouses.

Problem Statement

According to the United Nations (UN Women 2012; 2014), no woman should lose her status, livelihood, or property during widowhood. Lloyd-Sherlock, Corso and Minicuci (2015, 1374) claim that widowhood is strongly associated with a wide range of deprivations across low- and middle-income countries, including financial loss. The authors found that in South Africa it is not easy to associate widowhood with poverty or unemployment because of the social support grant which provides pensions to older women. However, their findings also revealed that the grant leads to family pension sharing, thereby encouraging other family members to live with pensioners. The legal, social, cultural and economic status of the world's widows currently requires urgent attention at all levels of society, given the extent and severity of the discrimination they experience (Klot and Nguyen 2011).

Therefore, the objectives of this study were to investigate the socio-economic challenges associated with widowhood and to identify support provided by social workers to widows experiencing socio-economic challenges.

Literature Review

This section provides a brief overview of widowhood in South Africa and the socio-economic challenges experienced by widows. It also provides the theoretical approach that underpinned the study.

Widowhood in South Africa

In South African traditional cultures, the widow's ordeal starts immediately after the announcement of her husband's death (Manala 2015). Even though South Africa has different cultures, they have some common rules when it comes to widowhood. For example, it starts with the family, in-laws, and elderly people asking the widow to sit in a designated place, and mostly, it is the couple's bedroom or a family room, where people come to express their condolences and pray (Manala 2015). The widow is expected to stay in the designated room until the burial. After the burial, the widow is expected to wear mourning clothes, which consist of a black, white or blue dress called "*izila*" in isiXhosa, so that she can be easily identifiable. "*Ukuzila*" is the process of mourning and "*izila*" means to mourn (Chukwu-Okoronkwo 2015). The widow is expected to wear "*izila*" until after the cleansing period, even if she is sick or pregnant. The duration of the mourning period differs from culture to culture, however, among the AmaXhosa tribe, it is a year. During that period, the widow is expected to stay at home, and not engage in any sexual relationship. Also, in some instances, the widow is not expected to engage in any social or public gatherings until after the cleansing rituals (Kotzé, Lishje and Rajuili-Masilo 2012, 744).

Socio-Economic Status of Widows

According to Akinlabi (2013), both old and young widows experience a drop in their economic well-being. Munnell, Sanzenbacher and Zulkarnain (2020) found that, in most cases, widows experience an income deterioration after the death of their spouses. In a study that was conducted by Lloyd-Sherlock, Corso and Minicuci (2015) a participant mentioned that during her marriage, she never worked because she did not have qualifications and her husband was working and providing for their family. However, this did not mean that she never contributed to their wealth. She was a housewife who was taking care of the household and supporting her husband. The Loomba Foundation (2015) has produced a global overview of the shortfall challenging widows and their families. The report revealed that the deprivation faced by widows has been invisible to the public and policy makers. According to the World Bank (2018), one in 10 African women over the age of 14 is widowed, and 6% are divorced. Many more have been widowed or divorced at some point in their lives. Statista (2021) shows that in South Africa, widows make up a noticeably large percentage (10.8%) of the population compared to their male counterparts who only make up 2.9%. Women who face poverty after the death of their spouses have been studied by several scholars (e.g., DiGiacomo et al. 2015; Lebni et al. 2020; Lloyd-Sherlock, Corso and Minicuci 2015).

Theoretical Framework

In critically intervening to address the socio-economic problems of widows, the empowerment approach is relevant. According to this approach, widows are more vulnerable compared to other women because they have lost their husbands and are now left with household responsibilities. They are exposed to, and experience, deprivations

sustained by unjust traditions. Many studies on the empowerment of women emphasise the importance of giving widows a platform to make their own decisions regarding their lives. For instance, Stepney (2019, 331–339) defines empowerment as “increasing poor women’s freedom (autonomy) of choice and action (agency) to shape their own lives”. This approach is important to social work practice and has been widely used in the profession. It focuses on the clients’ innate inner strengths rather than their problems (Saleebey 2009). This method is usually called the strengths-based approach, as it focuses on empowering people to deal with and solve their problems. This approach is also relevant in helping widows to cope with their socio-economic problems. Saleebey (2009, 11) defines empowerment as the process of assisting individuals, groups and communities to discover themselves. In intervening in the socio-economic problems and needs of widows, social workers should take into consideration the fact that widows need to be empowered and should also be provided with all the resources and options they require to be able to deal with and solve their challenges.

These resources should be discovered within the widows’ environment and they should be helped to understand the prospect, accessibility and availability of these resources and options. For this to be realised, essential principles, such as serving clients by collaborating with them and working with the view that their very environment is full of resources, have to be followed; hence, the participation of widows in providing information has been an essential feature in building the Social Work Integrative Basic Care Model (Kam 2021; Segal, Gerdes and Steiner 2019). Thus, the Social Work Integrative Basic Care Model was built to ensure that widows themselves contribute to the interventions needed and ensure that comprehensive services at various levels of intervention are made available to them.

Research Methodology

To address the key research objectives, this study used the qualitative method. The qualitative research approach produces a thick or detailed description of the participants’ feelings, opinions, and experiences, and interprets the meanings of their actions. Qualitative research provides the relationship between information processing with performance specifically and deeply (Rahman 2016). This approach allowed the widows to share the experiences and challenges that they encountered after the death of their husbands. Through this approach, the researchers were able to collect data that was comprehensive and detailed about the topic.

Research Context

The study was conducted in the Raymond Mhlaba Local Municipality (RMLM) in Eastern Cape, South Africa. As noted within the study rationale, the study was conducted due to the need to hear widows’ voices regarding their living circumstances. The RMLM was established by the amalgamation of the Nkonkobe Local Municipality and the Nxuba Local Municipality on 3 August 2016. It lies 140 km north west of East

London and approximately 200 km north east of Gqeberha (formerly Port Elizabeth). It is the second largest local municipality covering 3 725 km and constituting 16% of the surface area of Amathole District (RMLM 2017). The study site is situated in the rural villages of Eastern Cape, and the study took place to understand the well-being of widows in these areas. The RMLM is highly populated by households headed by single women. In 2016, the average percentage of female-headed households in the RMLM was 47.9% (Eastern Cape Socio-Economic Consultative Council 2017). The researchers also observed before conducting the current study that widows fell under these female-headed households.

Selecting the Participants

Non-probability sampling techniques were used in this study, and purposive and snowball sampling strategies were employed where 20 widows and 15 social workers were selected. There were two Social Development Organisations providing services to people in the RMLM. Purposive sampling relies on the researcher's judgment in that the sample is comprised of people who shared most features of the population that serves the purpose of the study (Palinkas et al. 2015). The social workers were selected using the purposive sampling technique. In selecting the widows, snowball sampling was used, whereby the researchers approached one person who met the criteria of the study and interviewed her. That person then referred them to others who also met the selection criteria, and so on (Kirchherr and Charles 2018).

Data Collection Process

To improve the validity and data trustworthiness, this study employed two methods of qualitative data collection, namely, semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. These methods were found necessary by the researchers to capture all the information from participants. They provided a forum to engage the participants in understanding their biographical profiles and experiences. The collected data was analysed manually, then it was organised according to the themes and patterns that emerged from the participants' responses. All the participants were Xhosa speaking and lived in the RMLM. It should be noted that pseudonyms were used to label the participants during the interviews to maintain confidentiality and anonymity. Social workers are not named to protect their confidentiality and anonymity. Interviews with the widows were held in their homes and focus group discussions were held in the social worker's office at the Department of Social Development (DSD).

Prior to data collection, the University of Fort Hare Research Ethics Committee approved the study, and an ethical clearance certificate was obtained (#TAN011STSH01). Therefore, before conducting the interviews, a detailed explanation of the study was provided, and consent forms were issued to the participants.

The data was analysed qualitatively, through thematic analysis. Firstly, the recordings were transcribed and then translated from isiXhosa into English. Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps for analysing thematic data were followed. The first step involved familiarisation with the data by engaging with and repeatedly reading the data transcripts. The second step involved taking note of any initial analytical observations. This step also involved making notes of ideas that came to mind (initial codes). These codes were generalised from the sets of data and then organised into main themes. This stage ended by coding all the data relevant to each theme to create sub-themes. Lastly, the "core" of each theme was identified and a brief, effective and instructive name was created for each theme. These themes were further linked to the existing literature and the aims of the study.

Ethical Considerations

Morrow (2009) defines ethics as a set of principles and behavioural by-laws that guide the researcher during the data collection process. Participation in this study was voluntary and the participants gave their permission to participate in the study. The researchers also shared information about the study. The participants signed consent forms, which clearly articulated the main aim of the study, their roles during the interview process, and the advantages and risks of the study. The researchers explained that there was no potential risk in participating in the study, however, some questions could trigger memories of their late husband. Surprisingly the participants answered all the questions with relative comfort and confidence. The participants were ensured of anonymity by not being asked for their names or identity numbers, instead, the researchers used codes to represent the participants. The participants were informed clearly on the aspect of confidentiality and that the information they provided would not be shared but only be used for research and academic purposes.

Findings

The participants' biographical information is presented here, and this is followed by a discussion of the themes that emerged from the data.

Table 1: Biographical information of the widows

Age range	Number of widows	Number of years as a widow
28–38 years	3	8–12 years
38–48 years	2	12–20 years
48–58 years	5	20–28 years
58–68 years	6	28–35 years
68–78 years	2	35–40 years
78–88 years	1	55 years
88–98 years	1	68 years

Most of the participants were between the ages of 28 and 68 years, while a few were between 68 and 98 years of age. Even though the ages of the participants did not generalise to all the widows in the RMLM, the findings revealed that they were widowed at a young age. It was apparent from the age of many of the participants alongside the period they had been widowed, together with the socio-economic challenges they faced, that the widows have endured the hardships and struggles of single parenting. The sample in the study included 20 widows. Regarding the race of the participants, the study comprised a relatively large number of black widows, with a minority of coloured widows.

Considering the employment status of the widows in the sample, many of the participants were pensioners. Some of the participants were self-employed, that is, owned a small business. The study also comprised some participants who were unemployed. All the unemployed participants depended on their children's social support grants as a source of income. Only a few participants were working full-time. The findings relating to the level of education indicated that several participants had low levels of education. Many widows who participated in the study had no education or had attended only grades one to two (primary education). A very small group of participants had passed Grade 12 and proceeded to study for a diploma at college.

Table 2: Biographical information of the social workers

Age range	Number of social workers	Work experience
25–35 years	6	1–10 years
35–45 years	7	10–15 years
45–55 years	4	15–25 years
55–60 years	3	25–35 years

The study sample included social work practitioners from the DSD, most of whom were females. Even though the findings were not generalised to all the social workers in the RMLM, they clearly indicated the gendered nature of the work at the DSD offices of the RMLM (Alice and Fort Beaufort). The ages of the participants ranged from 25–60 years, and their work experience ranged from 1–35 years, which showed that they had extensive knowledge of their field. Further, the findings indicated that all the study participants were black, Xhosa-speaking South Africans. On the level of education, most of the participants had obtained a four-year bachelor's degree in social work, while a few participants had obtained a three-year bachelor's degree in social work. This means that they have been trained theoretically and practically to serve vulnerable groups.

Themes Emerging from the Study

Five sub-themes emerged from the study, namely: unemployment and underemployment, poverty, loss of income, lack of socio-economic empowerment, and lack of psychosocial support for widows. They are discussed next.

Unemployment and Underemployment

One of the greatest challenges widows had to face after the death of their spouses is financial hardship (Lloyd-Sherlock, Corso and Minicuci 2015). When the participants were asked about the financial challenges they faced, their response was that most widows in the RMLM are unemployed. The findings also revealed that there is a lack of job opportunities. Unemployment exposed widows to many implications, as some of them had to start selling to make a living. Some are dependent on child support grants. A widow said:

Being a widow is stressful. After I got married, I could not proceed with my education because I had to look after my husband and children. My husband was the only one working. When he passed away, I could not find a decent job. (Babes)

Another widow stated:

As a mother, I must provide for my family but with me being unemployed that will be difficult. I sometimes ask people to give me piece jobs like doing laundry so that I can put food on the table. (Nozuko)

A social worker concurred and noted:

Most of the widows that I've been dealing with are not working. However, some of them at least sell fruit and vegetables in town to make a living. Some of them are dependent on child support grants, which I always feel that it's not sufficient to cater to all the needs of the household.

The conditions of unemployment and underemployment of widows are a global concern. Nnodim, Ike and Ekumankama (2013) assert that upon the death of her husband, the widow encounters several challenges as many widows are not prepared for their husbands' death and are still grieving. Both unemployment and underemployment are defined by the International Labour Organization (ILO 2011) as social issues that are confronting people, especially those who are between the ages of 45 and 50 years and those who are between the ages of 15 and 24 years. Unemployment and underemployment, in general, are the main issues in South African communities and they affect everyone, whether they are widows or not (Axelrad, Malul and Luski 2018). Furthermore, those who are unemployed face financial problems/hardships, and according to Richardson, Lester and Zhang (2012), financial hardship is conceptualised as not having the financial means needed to meet basic needs. According to the ILO (2022), 47.0% of women in South Africa are economically inactive, and widows are

included in these findings. This means that almost half of the women of working age in South Africa are not employed.

Poverty

Drawing from the participants' narratives, most widows experience poverty after the death of their spouses, with food scarcity and hunger being the greatest challenges. The participants expressed that widows struggle to buy groceries. All the participants revealed that widows mostly struggle financially to the point whereby they are unable to meet household basic needs. These include maintaining the property and other household essentials. Some of the participants acknowledged the challenge of poor household living conditions that they face after the passing of their spouses.

Two widows commented as follows:

I am struggling financially and that becomes an emotional strain. I am a pensioner; my husband was the one working – after he passed away my children and I are struggling. In my house, we all depend on my old age grant. (Annie)

You see this house is leaking, and when it is raining, we must move to one side of the house. It's not a healthy environment for my children because they always have flu. I can't even take them to good doctors because whatever money I make from selling tins, I must buy food. (Nokonwaba)

A social worker noted:

Most of the widows are struggling, they do not have a stable income. You can imagine, they have families to take care of, children to feed, and take to school. This other day, I ended up giving her R100 that I had, as she said that she has been waiting for food parcels and can't go home empty-handed.

The findings indicated that after the death of their husbands, most widows experience poverty. Ghorl (2017) mentions that there are almost 45 million widows around the world and 15 million of them live in poverty and are neglected. Research has established that widows are isolated and treated unfairly, for example, they are prevented from benefiting from property, businesses, and land that they owned with their late husbands (Korang-Okrah et al. 2019; Ndabarushimana and Dushime 2018). Being prevented from benefiting from these resources negatively affects the widows and their children's well-being. Some of them end up living in poverty as they do not have the means to sustain the household. Dube (2016) found that in rural and low-resourced communities, widows are forced to give up their resources to their in-laws.

Loss of Income

The findings revealed that most of the widows lost a source of income after the death of their spouses because their spouses were the ones who were working. For those whose

spouses were not working formally, at least they were doing odd jobs for survival. Therefore, when they died, their wives were forced to face poverty. Widows in under-resourced communities experience more economic threats than other groups of women. The loss of income also occurs when widows must give up the resources they owned with their husbands to their in-laws.

Comments from the widows included the following:

We do not have a source of income in this house. He provided for the family. Now that he passed away there is no one working. I am very poor; I do not have food. I am left to be a beneficiary of the child support grant. (Alungile)

My husband was not only providing for us but for his parents as well. His passing devastated us because as a mother to our four daughters who are still young, I must make means for them to eat, pay for school transport and make sure that we have basic needs. (Pinky)

My late husband and I owned taxis. After he passed on, his family took everything and chased me away. I had to run to protect myself and my children. I ended up coming back to my family homestead with nothing. I have three sons that I must take care of. (Khunjulwa)

A social worker noted:

Some of them are still waiting for the money that the mines where their husbands used to work promised. It's been years since submitted documents, even bank statements but until today, nothing. It's so sad.

According to Djuikom and Van de Walle (2018), in low-resourced communities, most women are financially dependent on their husbands. It becomes a challenge when their husbands die, as they start enduring financial struggles. Women in these communities find themselves in a more vulnerable situation when their husbands die as most of these families are in patriarchal communities. It is evident that when their husbands die, widows do not get anything from what they owned with their late husbands. Instead, the in-laws inherit everything especially if there are no legal documents or a written will (Loomba Foundation 2015; Sulumba-Kapuma 2018; Tembo 2012).

Lack of Socio-Economic Empowerment

Some of the widows were entrepreneurs, but they experienced socio-economic empowerment deficiencies. All the study participants expressed that financial struggle during widowhood led to most widows becoming entrepreneurs. Some participants mentioned the importance of starting a business and the positive impact it could bring towards assisting financially in the widows' households, especially regarding food security. Furthermore, some participants mentioned that through entrepreneurship widows can support themselves and their children. Many participants argued that

widows require some level of support for their small businesses. Some participants also acknowledged the negative impact of limited support on businesses, as they experienced challenges in managing their businesses and that led to businesses failing.

Two widows commented:

A lot of us widows are surviving by selling fruits and other things. For example, I'm selling fruits and I sew and sell hats. I have a stand in a rank in town. I went to the Municipality offices to ask for their support as I need a gazebo tent. They told me that they do not have the funds/budget for that, and I'm so disappointed. (Nokonwaba)

The only thing we need from our government is support. I'm selling vetkoeks and takeaways for a living, but I'm struggling as I do not have my own space in town. It's demotivating but I must make sure that we have food, and my children have clothes. (Philiswa)

A social worker noted:

Honestly, we do not have programmes that aim at strengthening the entrepreneurship skills of our clients. Some of them come to our offices to ask for our support, but we do not have funding. Some come and present brilliant business ideas.

Lloyd-Sherlock, Corso and Minicuci (2015) assert that the potential impact of widowhood on socio-economic status is hindered by the challenges of extracting data on the economic status of individuals from wider household data. For example, widowhood in India is not associated with poverty; however, it has been found that widows are disadvantaged compared to other members of the family (UN Women 2012). Another issue that widows are facing is pre-existing deprivations, such as being poor, and less educated. Research (Korang-Okrah et al. 2019; Ndabarushimana and Dushime 2018) has established that widows are isolated economically and socially. Also, widows are isolated from accessing socio-economic resources, properties, and accrued wealth. This isolation severely reduces the economic base and means of sustenance needed for the widows and their children's well-being.

The findings indicated that widows also encounter a lack of empowerment opportunities from support systems, including a lack of access to resources and information. The participants emphasised the inequality in the distribution of resources. Drawing from the study findings, many of the participants expressed that some widows lack knowledge about the availability of economic empowerment opportunities. Most of them are staying in rural areas and, therefore, it becomes a challenge to always be updated about developments regarding empowerment activities.

In Mali, issues confronting widows are better addressed, as the government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) work together in helping widows and their families. The plight of widows in West and Southern Africa has revealed a scenario of

a lack of help from humanitarian agencies. According to DiGiacomo et al. (2015), some widows are not used to managing finances, therefore, when they lose their husbands, it becomes difficult for them to manage their finances. Also, being inexperienced in managing the income of a household can pose some challenges to widows, irrespective of their socio-economic status. Widows may experience financial stress after the death of their husbands as they have lost a source of income. These expenses are associated with the loss of a financial provider and advisor because, at times, the expenditure exceeds the household budget. According to the study findings, widowhood becomes a financial problem for women, whereas men, on the other hand, can balance and cope with the situation. The lack of socio-economic empowerment that widows face implies that most policies are somehow failing to address the problems that confront widows (Zaroba 2012).

Lack of Psychosocial Support

While the focus of this study was on the socio-economic challenges faced by widows, another theme that emerged was the lack of psychosocial support for widows. It was found that widows experience psychosocial distress, such as emotional turmoil as well as social isolation, as they are not expected to participate in any social activities in their communities until they are cleansed. These women lack meaningful and appropriate support and that in turn affects their ability to adjust to the demands of widowhood.\

One of the widows was sobbing as she noted that:

I feel neglected by my husband's family as my in-laws told me that I should not take part in any activities that are happening in our community. I am always around my house, and I barely visit people. (Nokubonga)

Another widow stated:

I think I'm going to go crazy because I cannot even visit my friends. No one ever asked me how I am feeling as a widow after the funeral life went on. I feel like people have forgotten about me and I need them more than ever, I'm so lonely. (Lithemba)

A social worker said:

In some families, once a woman becomes a widow, she is not expected to be involved in community activities. There are certain gatherings that she can't attend because of "izila".

According to Powers, Bisconti and Bergeman (2014), families do provide support to widows, especially in the first few months; however, their support does not last long because families sometimes believe that the widow has adjusted well. Behera and Bhardwaj (2015) argue that even if widows seem to have adjusted, they still need that support. Widows sometimes feel lonely, and these feelings might lead to depression (Kim and Kim 2016; DiGiacomo et al. 2015).

Support Provided by Social Workers to Widows Facing Socio-Economic Challenges

The late Madiba (former president Nelson Mandela) stated that in order to fully attain freedom, women must be fully emancipated and empowered in all life spheres. Even with the integration of regional instruments meant to protect women, there is limited policy recognising the liberation and empowerment of widows in South Africa.

Two subthemes emerged from this theme, including financial support from social grants and part-time job opportunities.

Financial Support from Social Grants

It seems that after the death of their spouses, most widows are less likely to be economically stable than when their spouses were still alive, because they are unemployed. Most widows were financially dependent on their spouses. The participants revealed that after brief counselling by social workers regarding the socio-economic challenges experienced by widows, they were referred to the South African Security Agency for social grants, including old age grants, disability grants (R1 990 per month), and child support grants (R480 per month). Also, the DSD provides Social Relief of Distress (SRD), which is a provision of assistance through food parcels, school uniforms as well as the R350 grant provided to unemployed South Africans.

The study revealed that most of the older widows received an old-age pension grant. However, other participants voiced some queries regarding social grants, including food parcels that are unfairly distributed, and nepotism practised by social work practitioners when distributing services in the community. However, there is no financial assistance that specifically targets widows except financial support provided through the various types of grants.

A widow explained:

Financial struggles have been my worst nightmare since my husband passed away. I am very poor. I depend on my children's child support grants as sources of income. After my husband died, I never had any other income. (Thobeka)

A social worker articulated:

As a department, we do not have any grants/services that only cater to widows. We distribute food parcels to anyone who meets the requirements, meaning someone who is in need, who is not working.

Another social worker mentioned:

To be honest with you, there are no policies from the government that allow us to implement services that will cater to widowed women. We distribute food parcels to everyone who is in need.

According to Zikhali (2021), the government at both provincial and national levels, through the DSD, is doing its utmost to address this social problem by providing a grant scheme, which aims at eradicating poverty. It can be noted that social workers are not providing any services specifically for the widows, the mentioned services are a necessary service delivery for all South Africans. Ngwakwe and Iqbal (2021) found that in all seven types of grants, there are only three which try to reduce poverty, reduce inequality, and enhance education, and these include old age grants, disability grants, and child support grants. In contrast, in enhancing poverty reduction levels, out of seven, only four are working towards that and these include the war veterans' grant, the grant for dependency, and the foster care grant.

Part-Time Job Opportunities (Expanded Public Works Programme)

All the participants explained that some widows are working part-time jobs. They did not reveal any role that social workers play in ensuring that they find jobs when their spouses pass away. They apply like any other person and some get the job, but others are rejected. Some of the participants mentioned that if widows are staying far from town, it becomes difficult to be updated about job opportunities. Most of them mentioned that the government is trying to alleviate poverty and unemployment through these projects, and some were working on road projects.

Two widows commented:

I was fortunate enough to be included in a road project. I've been able to take care of my family. I'm however worried because once we are done with that road, I'm going to be unemployed again. (Kholiswa)

I will not say social workers have done anything for us as widows. They only help you when you go to their offices, and the services they provide are for everyone. (Manyathi)

A social worker mentioned:

I only wrote a motivation letter for a widow who wanted to apply for the EPWP since she was my client. I had to explain her situation in that letter, fortunately, she got the job.

The South African government created the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP) as one of the strategies to eradicate poverty and unemployment in the country. The EPWP provides job opportunities for many people who are poor and vulnerable (Sykes and Jooste 2014). According to Fourie (2016), the aim of the EPWP is to provide

work that is temporary and to develop skills that would enable people who were part of the programme to find permanent jobs when leaving the programme. Moreover, the EPWP and Community Work Programme (CWP) were adopted by the government as strategies to uproot poverty and unemployment in South Africa. The aim was to respond to high levels of poverty and structural unemployment compounded by gross inequality which makes South Africa one of the most unequal countries in the world (Tshishonga and Matsiliza 2021). These programmes are also available for everyone who is unemployed.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study made the following recommendations:

The DSD should develop policies that will assist widows so that they are able to meet the basic needs of their families, as the study findings have shown that most widows were dependent on their husbands financially.

The study revealed that there are limited services provided by social workers to women who have lost their spouses and struggle financially. The study, therefore, showed that there is a great need for social workers to provide early intervention services, including psychosocial and therapeutic interventions, to widows because losing their husbands affects their psychological and emotional well-being.

The DSD should use documents, such as the White Paper for Social Welfare (RSA 1997) and the Framework for Social Welfare Services (RSA 2013), whereby social workers provide more preservation services to empower and provide skills to widows and their families (especially entrepreneurial skills).

The study established that financial hardship is the greatest challenge for widows. Collaboration, links and referrals between social workers and other departments should create potential job opportunities for widows to avoid overdependence on social support grants. The availability of the EPWP and CWP that provide job opportunities to widows must motivate professionals to formulate interventions in the form of other income-generating programmes.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that the death of their husbands poses many challenges for widows, including poverty and loss of income, because in most cases, the husbands are the providers and breadwinners in their families. Most widows are unemployed; therefore, they lack opportunities that could empower them economically. Also, as widows move through their own experiences of grief, loss or trauma after the death of their spouses, they may also face stigma as some of the social and traditional norms do not allow them

to take part in certain social gatherings and activities. This poses new challenges for them to adjust well to widowhood.

It is evident that social workers do not have any services that are aimed directly at the well-being of widows. Their role regarding widows is not clearly defined but they are included in the general services that every South African should receive from the government. Although there are some programmes that have been put in place by the government to reduce poverty and unemployment, there are specific interventions required by social workers because widows form part of the vulnerable group that social workers serve.

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