

The Psychosocial Plight of Widows in the Binga District, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This article discusses the psychosocial challenges of widows in the Binga District in Zimbabwe. The feminist and ecological perspectives were used as theoretical frameworks to elucidate the various challenges faced by the widows in the district. Using a qualitative research approach which locates the participants in their cultural contexts and habitats, a phenomenological research design was employed. Aiming at providing a bifocal perspective on the psychosocial plight of widows, samples were drawn from populations of both widows and social service providers. Purposive sampling was used for selecting three categories of participants, namely ten widows for in-depth interviews, two focus group discussants with each group consisting of seven widows, and nine social service providers who were individually interviewed as key informants. Data were thematically analysed with predetermined themes and emerging themes. The results showed that widows in the Binga District were vulnerable and experienced intense psychosocial problems, which need systematic, interconnected, professional and localised social interventions.

Keywords: widows; psychosocial; plight; bifocal perspective; social work

Introduction

The abuse of widows in the Binga District, Zimbabwe, is ill documented yet of great concern to humanitarian agencies and professionals. These widows face a host of challenges resulting from different kinds of oppression and exclusion from socio-economic and political activities since time immemorial (Lomba 2014; Thomson 2006; Wojtczak 2009). In the district, widows are often isolated in residential communities on the grounds that they are associated with the spirit of the dead, which, in cultural norms of the district, associates them with uncleanness. Further, their in-laws rarely involve them in decision-making processes related to the division of the estate, commonly taking advantage of some customary unions with the deceased husbands which are not legally recognised and exclude them from inheriting their deceased husbands' property. Despite the problematic nature of such unregistered customary marriages among the population in Zimbabwe, these marriages have been on the rise since 1997 with a staggering figure of 82 per cent in 1997 (Dube 2011, 4) to 84 per cent in 2013 (Share 2013, 1).

Widowhood is equally a worldwide phenomenon that every society experiences. As an illustration, the global percentage population of widows was approximately 16 per cent in 2009 (Trivedi, Sareen, and Dhyani 2009, 38) and has recently increased by 9.0 per cent (The Loomba Foundation 2015, 10) due to wars such as those in Afghanistan, Syria and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In the developed countries, the phenomenon of widowhood is mostly experienced by older women above 60 years, while in contrast, the developing nations in Africa, such as Mali, Nigeria, Senegal and Zimbabwe have seen an increase in the number of young widows, from "15 years of age" (Peterman 2010, 5; Van de Walle 2016, 1). The implication is that these young women, who have not yet reached maturity, in most developing countries, such as Mali, Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Swaziland and Zimbabwe, tend to experience stress associated with widowhood at an early age, specifically the struggle to raise their children single-handedly and at the same time having to confront their personal psychosocial ills of growing up, in most cases without the help of their parents or immediate families.

Researchers agree that intervention by professional social workers is essential in safeguarding the individual worthiness of the widow and self-respect inherent in her humanness (Cummins, Sevel, and Pedrick 2012; Dube 2011, Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman 2013). Professional social workers are duty-bound and mandated to ensure the distribution of social justice to the marginalised and disenfranchised widows and their vulnerable children (DuBois and Miley 2014).

Problem Statement

Soon after the death of their husbands, widows in the Binga District are often discriminated from critical decision-making, isolated and oppressed. Those in customary marriages which increased from 82 per cent in 1997 to 84 per cent in 2013 (Dube 2011, 4; Share 2013, 1) suffer the most and legislation has failed to protect them.

Even though Zimbabwe ratified essential international treaties that protect widows, domestication of the progressive legislation is patchy and implementation lags behind. The amended Gender Policy of 2013 (Zimbabwe 2013b) and the new Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment Act (Zimbabwe 2013a) are fragmented, inadequately interpreted, misunderstood and often wrongly enforced.

Psychosocially and economically, widows are unable to meet their personal and health needs and those of their orphaned children, making them destitute. Many of the widows infected with HIV and AIDS are sandwiched by victimisation and blame by a convergence of in-laws and unsympathetic community members for infecting their husbands (Dube 2011; Izumi 2006), predisposing them to further vulnerability, helplessness and powerlessness (DuBois and Miley 2014, 150). The diversity of the dire problems faced by widows in the district is exacerbated by institutionalised oppressive cultural practices coupled by inadequate professionalised interventions to relieve their plight.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of the study was to determine the psychosocial challenges experienced by widows in the Binga District in Zimbabwe through a bifocal perspective which taps the experiences of the widows and the social service providers. To achieve this aim, the objectives were to

- conceptualise the psychosocial challenges of widowhood through relevant theoretical frameworks,
- examine the lived psychosocial challenges experienced by widows in the Binga District, and
- assess the psychosocial challenges experienced by widows from a social service provider perspective.

Widow as a Central Term

A widow in this study is a “woman whose husband died and who has not married again” (Idialu 2012, 6). The woman in question is often “demonised, ostracised, discriminated against and deprived of her human rights” (Totten 2012, 1) on account of her present marital status. In interacting with the environment around her made up of family members, community members, cultural practices, traditions and legal practices (Kirst-Ashman and Hull 2010), these often have a negative impact on her mental and physical coping abilities to the loss of her husband.

Ratification of International Instruments and Domestication into Policy

While international instruments protecting widows’ rights, such as the Beijing Platform of Action, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against

Women (CEDAW), and the Maputo Protocol (Asuagbor 2016, 3), were ratified by the Zimbabwean government, the CEDAW Optional protocol which seeks to ensure implementation of human rights obligations at national level was not ratified by the Zimbabwean government. This left space for national non-commitment to the implementation and accountability mechanisms on widows' rights. In an effort to domesticate the international instruments into national policies and laws, the amended Gender Policy of 2013 (Zimbabwe 2013b) and the new Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment Act (Zimbabwe 2013a) adopted a general approach to the protection of women without specificity on widows. While 200 other pieces of legislation changed in Zimbabwe in 2013 to improve the advancement of women's rights, the country scored lower in 2014 on the 2015 Southern African Development Community (SADC) Gender Protocol Barometer which reflects the country's progress on ensuring gender equality, women's rights and empowerment (Made 2015).

Theoretical Framework

There is a need to comprehend these challenges facing widows from many theoretical perspectives that attempt to explain their experiences. The study utilises the Radical Feminist Theory and the Ecological Systems Theory to give an abstraction of the experiences of widows after the death of their husbands.

In order to elucidate the experiences of widows to social ills, Johnson (2008) agrees with the explanations of the Radical Feminist Theory and the Ecological Systems Theory that the patriarchal environment should be condemned for the abuse of widows. These theoretical perspectives have been used to conceptualise sources of the problems that widows experience in the area of study.

The rationale for the use of the feminist theories is to analyse satisfactorily the plight of the widows in a patriarchal society which the feminist theorists condemn for the continued abuse of women. Radical feminist theorists maintain that women are the most oppressed group and that this oppression is deep, cuts across races, culture, and economic classes, and results in most suffering (Lord, Greiter, and Tursunovic 2012). In their argument, these theorists assert that men in patriarchal societies control norms and structures used by society to control women and there is a need to speak out against such structures and transform them for the advancement of women in society.

In this study, radical feminism is viewed as appropriate in explaining the unfair and unjust treatment of the widows as a result of oppressive powers of patriarchy inherent in the communities. To add substance to our view, Graff (2012) and Lewis (2015) agree that the subjugation of women is inherent in patriarchy and has been accepted in the daily lives of the people.

From another angle, the position of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Johnson 2008) is crucial in this study. We agree with the views of Johnson (2008) that this theory provides a clear understanding of how people relate to their environment

which affects them and also how they in turn affect the same environment (transactional relation). Emphasis is on the interactions of systems such as individuals, groups, communities and culture as major incumbents of the positive and negative results of such interactions (Johnson 2008).

Research Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative approach (Kumar 2008) to elicit the details of the challenges experienced by the widows. The qualitative approach depends strongly “on people who are articulate and introspective enough to provide rich descriptions of their experiences” (Padgett 2008, 53). This approach enabled the researchers to get significant and elaborate descriptions and interpretations of what the participants articulated from their own habitat.

Sampling Procedure

The study employed a non-probability homogeneous purposive sampling strategy in which participants were selected to be part of the study sample on the basis of “experience or the fact that they might be unusual or different from the norm. Their selection was not a matter of pure chance” (Denscombe 2010, 25; Gray 2014, 208; Padgett 2008, 53), but according to the eligibility criteria.

The selected widows resided in either Binga North (BN) which is peri-urban, or Binga South (BS) which is predominantly rural – this ensured representation from the two poles of the district. The key informants who participated in the study were social service providers to widows who experienced abuse. To ensure proper representation, professionally trained social service providers such as the District Social Welfare Officer, Police Community Relations Liaison Officers, and the District Development Officer participated as interviewees. Indigenous, traditional and non-professional social service providers which included Chiefs and Village Heads also participated in the study. Interviewing widows and social service providers enabled viewing the phenomenon from two different sources, which is termed a bifocal perspective in this study.

A sample size of 33 participants were interviewed which consisted of 24 widows and 9 key informants. A total of 10 widows participated in individual in-depth interviews, while 14 widows participated in two separate focus group interviews. The nine social service providers participated in the key informant interviews.

Data Collection Methods

One-on-one interviews were utilised in the first phase of the study to gather data from the widows. In the second phase of the study, the widows participated in focus group interviews (Hennink, Hunter, and Bailey 2011). The value of focus group interviews in this study is that they enabled the researchers to gather information that would otherwise have been missed during the one-on-one interviews with the widows.

The third phase of the data collection process engaged expert key informant interviews. The rationale and value of engaging key informants in the study were on account of their expert knowledge and information on the abuse experiences of widows from their work background.

Three interview schedules were utilised in this study. One interview schedule guided individual interviews with the widows, the second interview schedule guided focus groups interviews in the second phase of the data collection process, while the third interview schedule guided the interviews with the key informants.

Data Analysis

In this study, we used the thematic data analysis method. Whittaker (2012, 96) defines thematic data analysis as “identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) in data”. The data were transcribed verbatim by directly listening to the audio-recorded interviews of the participants to make meaning of their stories. This then led to data reduction, and to filtering the information (Hennink, Hunter, and Bailey 2011). We then described the data textually as obtained from the participants to create meaning. The data obtained were compared to observe patterns in the issues participants shared with the researchers (Hennink, Hunter, and Bailey 2011). Finally, the data were categorised according to the themes that emerged from the data extracts (See Table 1) and aided in the logical data display (Hennink, Hunter, and Bailey 2011).

Table 1: How the emergent themes were determined from the data extracts

<i>Question asked</i>	<i>Data extracts (grouped responses) from data items (interviews)</i>	<i>Emergent themes from data extracts</i>
What kind of marriage were you in?	Anna (BN): I was in <u>unregistered customary marriage</u> . I was in a good marriage. My husband paid all the <u>bride price as required</u> . I was in a <u>monogamous marriage</u> . My husband had married before and the wife died and that's when he married me.	Unregistered monogamous customary marriage
	Maria (BN): I was in <u>unregistered customary marriage</u> . I was in <u>polygamous marriage</u> . My husband had three wives. One of the wives died and the two of us remained live.	Unregistered polygamous customary marriage
	Esnathi (BS): My marriage had <u>papers from the court</u> and it was a <u>customary marriage</u> . Firstly, I was the only wife and as time went on he <u>married another wife and we become two married to him</u> .	Registered polygamous customary marriage

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness refers to the fact that “the results of the study are believable and worth paying attention to” (Fenton and Mazulewicz 2008, 1). Anney (2014) highlights Guba’s (1981) four trustworthiness concerns that any researcher needs to deal with as follows:

- How it will be known if the findings presented are genuine? (Truth value concern)
- How is applicability of the findings determined in relation to inquiry in other settings or with other participants? (Applicability concern).
- How will it be ascertained whether the findings would be repeated consistently with similar participants in the same context? (Consistency concern)
- How can it be known whether the findings come solely from the participants and that the research was not influenced by the bias, or personal interests of the researchers? (Neutrality)

Table 2 shows how the criteria used for assessing trustworthiness in this study were determined.

Table 2: Strategies used for enhancing trustworthiness

<i>Strategy for enhancing trustworthiness</i>	<i>Description of procedures</i>
Credibility	The researcher used different data sources such as individual one-on-one interviews and the focus group interviews with the widows as well as key informant interviews
Transferability	The researcher triangulated the participants from different socio-economic classes which included widows from rural communities, key informants both at professional level and those from traditional indigenous groups
Dependability	The researcher created an audit trail which can be followed. Member checking was used to enable the participants to confirm the data that were captured and to remove possible researcher bias
Confirmability	The researcher created an audit trail of the research process, following traceable events from the writing of the research proposal, up to its approval including the last stage which was about data interpretation, presentation, conclusions and recommendations based on the information the researcher obtained from the participants

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained for the study (NWU-004S91-11S-491) from the Ethics Committee of the North-West University. Ethical clearance was also obtained from the Local Government offices, the District Council and the Ministry of Women’s Affairs in the Binga District. These constitute the authoritative government structures of the district. Further, permission was also sought and received from the Village Heads and Chiefs before interviewing the participants.

The participants were informed about the objectives of the study, procedures to be followed and the duration of each interview session. The briefing sessions were followed by the completion of consent forms which stressed the voluntary nature of the study. The participants were also assured of confidentiality. Questions that had the potential to evoke the emotions were used sparingly especially given that the study focused on widowhood and the inevitable sense of nostalgic loss that would be stoked during the interviews.

Results

Phases One and Two of the Study: Individual and Focus Group Interviews with the Widows

To initiate the interviews, personal information of the participants were sought to create a biographical picture of the 10 participants who were part of the individual interviews and the 14 participants who were involved in focus group interviews. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the participants. From the predetermined theme of personal information of the participants, emergent themes such as the age, number and gender of children, size of the household, level of education, and mode of sustenance were captured and discussed.

The findings of the study revealed that the study women in the Binga District are widowed from the age of 30 to 49 years. This is the typical age range at which women reflect on their life and evaluate their achievements and satisfaction (Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman 2013). Unfortunately widows in the Binga district experience emptiness as they lose their partners, property and meaning in life. This opens floodgates for psychological strain in their lives.

The study found that all widows had dependent large family sizes in need of their support. This aggravated their psychosocial strain since they have meagre resources to care for themselves and their children. Unfortunately, the widows also have to bear the burden of caring for other extended family members in Binga owing to common extended family structures in the district.

Despite article 10 of CEDAW (1979), which mandates equal rights for women in education, women in Binga have not fully benefited from the calls of this international instrument. It emerged that not all 24 participants were functionally literate. From the 24 participants, 12 never went to school. Twelve participants only managed to get primary education, meaning that they were disadvantaged in terms of literacy. In the Binga District, this finding is a litmus test indicating lower milestones achieved for Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) number four which aims at equality in education among citizens of any community. These findings are consistent with those of Van de Walle (2011) in Mali, where 88 per cent of women were not formally educated. Izumi (2006) and Steady (2006) observed in their study that poorly educated women could not articulate their rights and easily gave up the fight for their property inheritance rights cases. This means that the lack of formal education disempowers widows. Owing to the lack of functional education as found in the study, the widows survived through tilling the land, piece jobs and vending with little impact on reducing their poverty. These modes of sustenance in the wake of the deteriorating economic situation in Zimbabwe and the rural nature of the District of Binga simply exacerbate poverty for the widows and turn them into welfare cases, which are predominantly provided for by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as Save the Children.

Interesting themes that emerged on psychosocial challenges facing widows in the Binga District include unregistered customary marriages, husbands dying from illnesses, misunderstandings between the widows and their in-laws, widows being subjected to traditional widow sexual cleansing, stress, and loneliness. The majority of the participants (22 of 24), were in customary marriages. A sub-theme that emerged is unregistered customary marriages. These marriages are not recognised legally and are unregistered under Section 3 of the Customary Marriages Act of 2001 (Chirawu 2012). This finding was confirmed by Share (2013) who attested that in Zimbabwe, 84 per cent of the customary marriages were unregistered thereby exposing widows to many untold challenges.

It emerged that in Binga, illness takes a toll on men leaving behind their wives and children with the possibility of being infected in the wake of the deteriorating health system. In the study, 23 widows indicated that their husbands succumbed to HIV and AIDS referred to as the euphemism “new diseases”. One participant had this to say:

My husband died in the year 2000 and he died from this new disease. (Participant A (BN))

Ndlovu (2013) confirmed that in southern Africa, Zimbabwe is hardest hit by the HIV and AIDS pandemic leading to socio-economic difficulties such that churches struggle to handle the consequences of the pandemic for their humanistic aid interventions.

As if the death of their husbands was not painful enough, it emerged that widows face challenging misunderstandings with their in-laws including a lack of support and comfort after the death of the husbands. Instead humiliation was meted out to them openly accusing the widows of being responsible for the death of their husbands. This reflects the abuse of widows in patriarchal societies which radical feminists fight to end (Teater 2010). Three participants revealed this:

During the funeral they insulted me, each spoke as they wanted to. A-a-a-a! They spoke all they wanted to say! (Siphiwe (BS))

Later, news started spreading that I bewitched my husband.

The in-laws accused me and the other wife of killing him. (Bina Chi (BS))

In condemnation of this inhumane treatment of the widows, the Child Welfare Information Gateway (2013) and Idialu (2012) contend that such emotional abuse to the widows causes intense psychological pain that affects the widows for the rest of their lives. From an ecological systems theory, inhuman, discriminatory and oppressive treatment of widows should be eliminated so that the widows can adjust to the new phases of their lives (Teater 2010).

Some other stressful experiences after the funeral that emerged as themes in the study were that widows were subjected to customary and traditional widow sexual cleansing and levirate marriage by their in-laws which are done by the brother of the deceased and the widow. This practice disregards of Article 5 of CEDAW (1979) which is instructive on abolishing such practices. The in-laws believe that sexual cleansing ensures that the widow is freed from the evil spirit of the dead and levirate marriage maintains the clan name. However, it appears that these enduring practices are receiving resistance from some women who fear contracting HIV and AIDS. This results into property inheritance disputes and property grabbing from the widows.

At personal level, the widows experience deep stress, loneliness and are often isolated by the community and perceived as unclean because they are associated with their dead husbands (Holden, Kim, and Novak 2010; Trivedi, Sareen, and Dhyan 2009). The widows also struggled to care for the children owing to reduced material and financial support after losing their husbands.

At the end of the interviews with the widows, the researchers found that the widows felt cared for and relieved indicating that the humane and empowering nature of social work approaches played a pivotal role in allowing the widows to vent out their bottled emotions. Two participants shared these feelings to emphasise the need for social work intervention:

I feel also happy that somebody's son whom I don't know where he comes from has come to give me a chance to talk about my problem. I will definitely sleep peacefully today. God bless you and travel back safely. (Choolwe (BN))

I feel relieved and this talk we had is really good to me. (Esnathi (BS))

Phase Three of the Study: Key Informant Interviews

Phase three of the study involved social service providers in the Binga District, namely the Magistrate, District Development Officer, District Social Welfare Officer, Police Community Relations Liaison Officers, Chief Saba (BS) and Chief Sikalenge (BN) and two Village heads, one from Binga North and one from Binga South.

From the social service providers' work experience, it emerged that property grabbing by in-laws was one form of abuse the widows faced in the Binga District. This resulted in fights between the widows and their in-laws. Inevitably so, were the custody battles for the children. Sadly, the custody of children is not anchored in the best interests of the children, but the in-laws use this to take control of the property left behind by the deceased. Two participants had this to say:

... the widespread problem is custody of children battles. (Chief Saba (BS))

Custody of children battles are directly linked to the wealth that has been accumulated in the household. The belief is that the one who retains the custody of the children will

have a claim over the wealth. You will find that custody battles are not premised on the best interest of the child which is what we could expect as social welfare officers ... the best interest of the child. (District Social Welfare Officer)

Widows are also not spared from cultural sexual abuse; their vulnerability as widows exposes them to sexual violence (Lomba 2014). This suggests that widows need extra protection as they are defenceless against sexual abuse. The Ecological Systems Theory regards culture as a pragmatic sensitive external life stressor (Teater 2010), requiring social work assessment (Masuka 2014, 38) to benefit the people practising it.

Jealousy contributes to the abuse of widows by their in-laws. Considering the bride price which was paid by the widow's family and the unstated "fact" therefore that she belongs eternally to the family of the deceased contributes to the abuse of the widows. Essentially, the family of the deceased may prefer the widow to consider remarrying within the family to maintain ownership of her and the property left behind by the deceased.

Long existing misunderstandings between the widows and in-laws played a significant role in abuse of widows in the views of the social service providers. This then translates into suspicions of the widows killing their husbands. Abuses of the widows then become befitting punishment from their in-laws.

It emerged that the psychosocial plight of the widows is made more desperate by the lack of implementation of the laws due to the lack of resources and befitting programmes. Mashiri (2013) agrees about the presence of policies and laws protecting women in Zimbabwe but condemns the fear of reporting violations and abuse by the victims as the main problem with implementation of the laws.

Discussion of Findings

A discussion of the three phases in which this study was conducted is presented in this section. The Radical Feminist Theory links the oppression of widows in the Binga District to patriarchy which is used as the vehicle for abuse. The cultural practices and socialisation offers concrete highways to the oppression of widowed women. The Ecological Systems Theory, however, highlights culturally patriarchal contextual underpinnings which fail to accord the widows of their human rights. The oppressive and less empowering socio-economic, legal and political nature of the Binga District is linked to the ecological explanations. The theory links the findings to the transactions widows have with other people that result in unjust treatment.

Phases One and Two of the Study

Phases one and two involving individual and focus group interviews presented intriguing discussion points. In Binga, widowhood cuts across ages that range from 27 to 68 years, meaning these age groups among women should therefore take specific measures to prepare themselves psychologically as they are at risk of being widowed.

Most widows came from rural backgrounds, lacked formal education and survived mainly through subsistence farming. This inevitably rendered them to depend on agricultural activities for sustenance (IRIN 2015). The combination of the lack of formal education and practicing of subsistence farming pose distinct problems for widows in the Binga District. The rural nature of their lives deprives them of needed economic growth and development, which is criticised by the Ecological Systems Theory (Teater 2010). Widows find themselves unemployable and constantly farming in a hand-to-mouth farming system which worsen their poverty.

Households sizes have been found to be generally big (with more than six family members on average) with some of the dependents of the widows being relatives or children left behind by relatives who died. Large and extended families in the Binga District are common and women are the pillars of these families' survival. This is despite the fact they are themselves struggling to raise their own children with limited resources. This seems to suggest that women generally tend to be generous, nurturing and caring which predisposes them to forced big family sizes. While being nurturing and caring can be understood to be inherent in women in general, the radical feminists see these characteristics as part of a societal oppression infused in the normative upbringing of girls and women as a social norm in patriarchal societies (Hardiman, Jackson, and Griffin 2010).

The widows in the study entered into unregistered polygamous marriages. This is despite the fact that customary marriages can be registered under the Marriages Act (Chapter 5:07) of Zimbabwe. These findings confirm those of Share (2013, 1) who found that 84 per cent of widows in Zimbabwe are in unregistered, polygamous marriages. Hosegood, McGareth, and Moultre (2009) found that unregistered customary marriages in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, are linked to loyalty to the religious beliefs of the Shembe religion. This means that customary marriages are normally infused into the religious belief system making them more sentimental to abolish and ingrained in the lives of the people.

Most widows reported that their husbands succumbed to HIV and AIDS termed "new illnesses". The widows are themselves infected, which adds an extra burden on them. If men continue to die due to HIV- and AIDS-related illnesses in the rural areas of Zimbabwe, the abuse of their widows and children will remain unchecked as many of the people in the rural areas adhere to strict traditional beliefs that are abusive of widows. These traditional beliefs are condemned overtly by radical feminists, especially when widows are accused of having infected their husbands with HIV which then becomes a passport and a favourite avenue for abusing the accused widows.

The plight of widows in the Binga District is aggravated by the experience of challenging misunderstandings with their in-laws including public humiliation during the funerals and accusations of bewitching their husbands. Such accusations are difficult to erase from the mindset of the in-laws who believe in witchcraft. The ecological

perspective holds that if viewed from an interactional standpoint, such interactions of the widows with the immediate environment have negative connotations (Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman 2013). Upon the death of their husbands, widows experience deep psychological anxiety and fear over how the in-laws would treat them. This state of affairs contributes significantly to immense psychosocial problems that widows continue to face in the Binga District.

The widows in the Binga District are subjected to harmful cultural practices like sexual cleansing and levirate marriages. The widows' refusal to participate in these traditional rituals resulted in cold relationships with their in-laws and stirred further misunderstandings. This shows that women are commoditised, an element very much against their human rights. In Article 5(a) of CEDAW (1979), all nations have been urged to take specific measures to fight against the commoditisation of women as such practices militate against widows' rights. Radical feminist theorists have long argued that culture is one instrument that patriarchal societies have used to control women (Lord, Greiter, and Tursunovic 2012).

The court processes involved in assisting the widows to transfer ownership of assets and property to their names after the death of their husbands have been found to be demanding, long, unfamiliar and stressful to them. Widows lack the needed energy to follow up on legal interventions owing to intense psychological distress associated with the death of their husbands. Given the lengthy nature of the court processes, widows' fragile psychological state and limited resources, their efforts to seek court interventions are limited suggesting the need for social work interventions that are empowering.

Added to the psychological challenges, the widows experienced a loss of dignity and support to meet their needs. Dignity and respect are every human being's basic right and as such the loss thereof signifies a loss of the essence of human life (Chenube and Omumu 2011). Being unable to support and meet the needs of their children therefore is an acute social problem for the widows, which makes adjustment and recovery from the loss of breadwinners unbearably difficult.

Support for the widows in the Binga District leaned towards spiritual support and upliftment. Apparently, the deaths of their husbands lent widows to spiritual downturns and then in need of spiritual upliftment. Some of the widows received prayers from their churches. Widows resort to spiritual comfort as a way of coping with the distressful experiences of their husbands' death (Cohen 2007). Spiritual needs evidently form part of the aggregate of interventional needs of the widows in the Binga District.

A few widows (4 of 24) managed to find either traditional or professional legal recourse. Among the few widows that sought help, the Chiefs and the District Magistrate were mediation service providers. The findings of the study underscore the fact that widows mainly seek mediation services. It is, however, noteworthy that the widows' psychosocial problems are neglected thereby leaving them in deep stress.

Phase Three of the Study

This phase of the study involved social service providers that attended to the widows. The forms of abuse experienced by widows in their service areas as revealed by the social service providers included battling for custody of their children. Additionally, the in-laws demanded and grabbed property from the widows. Brewer (2011) and Idialu (2012) support the findings of this study that property grabbing from widows is rampant once their husbands die. Van de Walle (2011) also records that custody of children is a problem fuelled by the bride price which disempowers widows in issues connected to the custody of their children.

Surprisingly, the widows were accused of killing their husbands. They were held to account for the death of their husbands with suspicions of witchcraft and infecting them with HIV and AIDS. This resulted in humiliation of the widows in the presence of moaners during funerals. Idialu (2012) identifies accusations against the widows in Nigeria while Mgbako and Glenn (2011) found similar accusations and humiliation meted out to widows in Malawi. The widows in the Binga District are vulnerable to emotional torment and turmoil adding to their powerlessness.

Despite global calls to combat the sexual abuse of women, social service providers revealed that widows were sexually abused in Binga. This was rampant despite the scourge of HIV and AIDS. Brewer (2011) and Lomba (2014) also found that rape and sexual perpetration in the context of widow cleansing were common in India and Malawi. This seems to suggest that sexual abuse of widows might be hard to stop as there is an institutionalised sexual pervasiveness against them through cultural practices.

Grudges and pre-existing conflicts were also contributory to the abuse of widows. Before the death of their husbands, the widows could already be harbouring disagreements with their in-laws and hence the death of their husbands leave the widows more vulnerable and exposed as their allies for support have died. This has been found to be one reason why widows do not get the emotional support they deserve when their husbands die.

Limitations of the Study

The findings enumerated are considered against the limitations identified in this study. Through interviewing the widows once, the researchers used social work skills on a small scale. Larger scale interaction could have produced more exhaustive data. During the data collection process, ground rules were set and agreed upon, but interruptions happened in the homes of the widows (the places where the interviews took place) such as the ringing of cellphones, crying of attention-seeking babies and visitors coming into the homes of the participants. This reduced the concentration of the participants in the interview process, meaning crucial insights might have been missed. Also, the language translation presented another problem in that some words the participants used in Chitonga (the indigenous language used during the interviewing processes) were

difficult to translate into English. This made the researchers to use descriptive phrases because of the unavailability of English equivalences. As a result valuable information might have been lost during this period of translation.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Various pertinent conclusions were reached from the findings of the study. Widows suffer a host of psychosocial challenges that cut across all age groups. Lower levels of education among the widows have a negative impact on their ability to understand their constitutional rights and viable interventions for the psychosocial problems experienced. As a result, this study recommends stakeholder educational programmes on the rights of widows in the Binga District.

Another conclusion was that widows are affected at two substantial levels: the individual and the immediate environmental levels. At the individual level, the widows experience intrapersonal and psychological challenges that include intense mental stress and loss of dignity among other community members. Further, the widows feel isolated and lonely as they have lost their companions they were intimate with and close to. At the immediate environmental level, widows experience a series of psychosocial challenges that are brought about by the people around them. There is a lack of support during the time of bereavement even though the widows need it desperately, and they are exposed to cultural practices such as forced widow cleansing and levirate marriages. Professionalised and systematic interventions should be prioritised with law enforcers committing themselves to the implementation of new laws that abolish harmful cultural practices concomitant with ratified international instruments.

The main form of interventions attempted by the widows is legal recourse as traditional dispute settlements that are devoid of humane approaches leave widows deeply stressed with intrapersonal volatile emotions. Developmental professional interventions are not prioritised and lack deliberate inclusion in welfare programmes. A residual approach to social welfare dating back to the colonial era is still practised. Therefore this paper recommends a developmental approach with consolidated social work interventions.

This study analysed the psychosocial plight of the widows who had first-hand information, local indigenous leadership and information from professionals helping the widows. The study confirmed that cultural practices buttressed in patriarchy coupled with a lack of systematic interventions, as the ecological and radical feminists affirm, play a significant role in the psychosocial plight of the widows in the Binga District.

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