Introduction

Issues of violence against women that need our intervention in theological training are many in our communities. These issues affect our mothers, sisters, aunts, daughters wives and hence the need to address them. Students have to be made aware of these issues and helped as to how they can help and deal with the overwhelming problems affecting women. This will empower the students on what to do when they are confronted with a similar problem.

Widowhood is one of the issues that people do not want to talk about. It is a taboo and you don’t speak about the dead. Yet this is an issue that is increasing in our communities because of the number of death occurring. There are many women who have become widows and some are widowed at an early age. HIV and Aids has contributed in the number of widows both young and old. How are these women helped to cope up with their situation? What role can the church play to help such women begin to heal? How can student ministers be equipped to go to the community and bring significant change to many women who are suffering and have lost hope. How can the understanding of Gender and Theology help overcome the plight of widows and their challenges of pain and grief and bring healing? This paper is going to look at this neglected area of concern which needs to be addressed in our institutions of Higher Learning. It is an area which will empower communities to treat women with respect and help them to go through their grief with dignity and hope.
**Death of a husband**

Each type of loss brings its own kind of pain, challenges, reactions and responses. Death of a husband is a painful experience, especially tragic death. It leaves the wife devastated, confused and without hope. Collins (1988:348) confirms this in the following observations: ‘Loss of a wife or a husband is much more difficult. Burdens that previously were shared must now be borne alone, and that can be very stressful’. Immediately the wife is called a widow, her plans and future are doomed. In our African society the dignity she had is stripped. The woman is made vulnerable and feels marginalized with very few to turn to for support. Edet (1992:31) has remarked concerning African practices that: ‘The death of a husband heralds a period of imprisonment and hostility to the wife or wives. This treatment may or may not be out of malice, but in all cases, women suffer and are subjected to rituals that are health hazards and heart-rending’. It is a difficult time indeed where she is confronted with questions, Why me God? Why are they treating me like this? Do they think I killed my husband? How should I continue with life from here? Who should I turn to, someone who will be able to understand what I am going through? With these and many more unanswered questions, she has to make major decisions about her life and that of her children.

News of the death of a husband will come as a shock to many women, mostly if it is through tragic accidents and or that of young husbands. One young widow shared with us how she could not believe the news broken to her by the police of the car accident that killed her husband. She thought for a moment that they were lying to her that it could not be her husband, ‘you have taken my husband alive to the mortuary. I will not believe you unless I feel him’. The way the

---

1 Koleka Mapasa relating the story of the death of her husband at a Widows Retreat of 20th June 2002 at the University of Fort Hare.
news is broken to many women is very insensitive and leaves them in a state of shock without someone close to turn to for support. Sometimes people are not sensitive enough as to how much this can affect the person’s life. Our African communities are supposed to be supportive but are confronted with “cultural practices” which often leave the widow victimized and a victim. Many people no longer live in family units or clans that can support them at a time like this. The husband may die whilst both of you are away working in the urban area and your immediate family members are far.

I lost my husband during 1998 as a result of a tragic car accident. I had gone through a lot of trauma to get all this into perspective. It was very difficult for me because this happened in South Africa when I was so far away from my family in Malawi. My husband was killed in an accident that occurred on a Friday and I only got to know about it on a Tuesday morning in the following week. I will not forget that terrible week where I had to plan everything to take his remains back to Malawi. Since then, it has not been easy, I miss him and often feel lonely. Whenever I needed comfort or support from my fellow Christian women, I was repeatedly told that I was not alone. They tried to point out to me that I am now married to God by quoting from Isaiah 54: 4-5

Do not be afraid; you will not suffer shame. Do not fear disgrace; you will not be humiliated. You will forget the shame of your youth and remember no more the reproach of your widowhood. For your maker is your husband— the Lord God Almighty is his name.

They further said that Jesus Christ was going to be the father of my children and that I should ask him for anything. When a person is made vulnerable, one has no choice but to listen. Practically speaking what these Christian women think and say is not possible in real life. They assume that God becomes the husband
of only the widows. What about the single women and the married women too, is God not also their husband? There are times when one is lonely and needing someone to talk to just to air out what is in your heart. In this case a physical presence of a person who you can just hug and make you feel not abandoned is more applicable. I am not denying the presence of God at all times in the life of widows and in my own life, but there are times one remembers the role the husband played and misses that. Many times the Bible is misinterpreted in making innocent people become more vulnerable. Church people will not quote the passages in the Bible that empower widows and that gives the church responsibility to look after them. I am mindful that many of my fellow sisters are going through similar experiences and are not able to speak out and have no one to turn to for solidarity.

**Harmful Cultural Practices**

Cultural practices differ from one ethnic grouping to another, and from one family clan to another. There are many customs and practices that people follow when death occurs in a family. More of these customs and practices are expected and targeted to be observed by a widow. The woman is seen at this time not to be in a position to make concrete decisions. Decisions are imposed on her. She cannot decide on how her husband’s funeral should be. Of course as Collins (1088:347) puts it that: grief usually involves intense sorrow, pain, loneliness, anger, depression, physical symptoms and changes in interpersonal relationships’. But this should not make the family take things for granted that the widow is not in a position to make her own decisions. The family even decides on who has to inherit the property without her consent. She is made vulnerable and expected to go through all the customs/traditions and rituals without question. Fulata Moyo (2002:400) was accused of not crying loudly for everybody to notice that she was the widow. This case may suggest that people do not come to comfort you at a difficult time, but they come to see and witness
the way you are handling your grief and then talk about it behind your back. Some of the harmful practices are:

**Widowhood Cleansing**

The concept of ritual cleansing is rooted in many traditional societies in Africa. Rituals are performed after the death to cleanse or purify the affected person and in this case the widow. They do this in fear of evil spirits that are regarded as agents of death. A widow in this case is regarded as being ritually unclean because of her husband’s death. She goes through many hazardous experiences. Even though the Government of Malawi is trying to educate communities through their traditional Authorities the dangers of practicing such rituals because of HIV and Aids, some families continue to practice cleansing rituals. These are members that belong to our churches, hence the need for churches to take a leading role in helping to raise awareness on the dangers of these practices. To those that still practice feel that mourning the deceased is complete when the wife performs the required rituals. The most common cleansing ritual is what they call ‘Taking away death’ (kupita kufa or kuchotsa pfumbi). In this practice a man is identified in the community to perform the ritual of cleansing and is paid. His responsibility is to have sexual intercourse with the widow. In doing this the family believes that they are cleansed from evil spirits that cause death. But this raises many questions. What has sexual intercourse got to do with cleansing of the whole family clan? Why should it be the poor woman who is already suffering because of the death of her husband made to suffer more? There is no respect for this woman who once was the wife of their son, they cannot give her the dignity she requires and deserves. She does not just lose a husband, she also loses her integrity, identity, dignity and her property which could sustain her and the children.
The woman is not consulted on what will happen so that she can give consent to what will happen and may be to have a choice of a man. In many cases they say the man asked to do this kind of a job could be someone who is mentally not well, a dirty unclean man – why? What has the church said about this?

Young widows have a problem because they have no one to turn to for support because the older people would want to make sure that they go through what they did. This experience is not only in Malawi, Reggy-Mano gives the example that, In Kenya a young widow received advice from an older widow who claimed to be born – again Christian saying “Don’t follow Christianity blindly. When it comes to Luo tradition make sure that you put your house in order. When she asked what she meant by that, the old widow said you pull down your pants. It is the way things are done. It will only be for one night and your family will be taken care of. In the morning, you can repent, and go on with your Christianity. Women have suffered this silently and other women have forced them to go through the experiences they had. In the context of HIV and Aids what would be the outcome? There are two possible scenarios, either the woman may infect the man if she is positive or the man because of doing this kind of ceremony to many women may be positive and infect the innocent woman with HIV and or STI’s.

**Inheritance**

A widow may be inherited by her in-laws so that they can control the property and children. Where there is no inheritance, the in-laws make sure that all the property is taken away from her and left with nothing – she has to raise children on her own without support. In places where the church has played a role in stopping widowhood rituals, the African Christian widow still remains handicapped in terms of finance and property inheritance. If the widow is not in
paid employment, she is thrown into penury, which goes against Christian principals (Nwachuku 1992: 69).

The woman suffers after many years of working in the home and having acquired property together with her husband, all is taken away and left with children without money to survive on. Fulata Moyo was lucky in this case because the husband told his relatives before he died that most of the property they had was bought by the wife. For this reason they told her that all the property belonged to her (Moyo 2002: 401). After taking all the property the woman is left with children and she has to dress in black to show that she is mourning her husband. The mourning period vary from family to family, but many times this takes at least period of one year.

**Isolation from the real world**

Many widows have expressed that the most torturing experience they went through is when they were left alone with no one to talk to. Remember that she has no choice of cloths she is expected to wear black during this mourning period. As she is not supposed to were fancy cloths. Black is the sign of mourning. Some traditions shave the hair of the widow so that she does not have to style the hair. With order women they put a blackhead scarf all the time. She is a different person with a different appearance left alone, what will be in her mind? She cannot eat with others and uses old plates which will be destroyed after ritual are done. She is restricted socially. She is not allowed to visit other homes or shake hands with people. At a time when she needs support and comfort to help her begin to get to terms with what has happened, she is made to be alone – lonely with no one to talk to which in many cases affects her physical health. To be silent and not seen talking is one of the virtues of a good grieving widow – so is believed and taught. She is marginalized and without decisions to make, only following the dictates of the in laws. Many women
suffer silently and become lonely which leads to depression. This has resulted to some women dying early thereafter because of such treatment.

Now as a single person, the widow begins to experience what single women go through. She must not speak to men otherwise she will entice them. In as much as a minister may want to help and assist the widow, he may find it difficult because of what people will say. It is as if all the men become her relations. She is afraid on how to address certain issues, she will need someone to be with her as a witness. In the professional world it is difficult because you cannot work with women only. It is also difficult for a person to always ask someone to accompany you if you will be meeting with men. A stigma is attached to widowhood just like single women are.

**Impact on children.**

Children grow to see the negative treatment that their mother get from her relatives and this affects them psychologically. Many children have not done well at school, dropped out of school and have grown up miserable. Other children when they grown up, have applied such negative treatment to their wives when they marry, because they think that is how women should be treated. So we can see that the treatment that the mother gets, children see it to be abnormal and it reflects on their future life. Some of the children that we see in the streets to day or as drug addicts are as the result of the treatment they went through after the death of their father.

**Why is this a Theological Issue**

Widowhood is a theological issue because it deals with human dignity. We need to look at our theology and see what we can do to address the issue. What does
God say about widows? How can dignity be restored to these women when they read scriptures? Will they find affirmation? What is the role of the Christian church on issues of violence? These are some of the questions that we need to look at and address them so that dignity is restored and healing is achieved.

Many women become widows at an early stage, a difficult time of uncertainty and reproach. This needs some mechanisms or special facilities that would help and assist them to heal and liberate themselves from unfortunate and negative widowhood experiences. Unlike the white community, they have counseling facilities and immediately they are able to see a family doctor and or a psychologist. In many cases a will is made and the community accepts it when the widow decides to remarry. On the contrary, in our African society this is not the case, as said earlier, the widow is expected to go through painful experiences adding on top of the pain she has already of loosing her dear husband. The widow is expected to go through all mourning rites in order to be accepted again in the community. As Oduyoye puts it: ‘It is assumed that a husband’s soul will not rest until the widow has completed elaborate mourning rites and has been purified’ (1992:15).

I conducted a Widows retreat in June 2002 with women who are widows within the community of Fort Hare University in South Africa. The experiences of these women were very traumatic. They had never had a chance to talk about their experiences of widowhood. Some of them had been widowed for more than 20 years and still hope that one day their husband will return. They were afraid to sleep alone in the bedroom because of all the nightmares they had. Some would sleep with the door open thinking that the husband would come whilst they were asleep and should not miss the door that leads to his former bedroom. How can these women be helped to understand death and to go through the grieving stages which will help them accept it at the end?
What mechanisms or systems are there in the Church to help and assist widows in their experience of pain as well as their healing? How do widows understand the liberation wrought by a God who was so particular about widows and their problems?

The community has helped widows to a certain extent, and this kind of support is declining. How can the church learn from the community, from the support family units give? Oduyoye (2001:37) justifies the need to do a theology from such experiences of women and says that: ‘Women experience the injustice of being blamed for whatever does not go right. The injustice of having to implement decisions they did not help to make, the injustice of having to struggle to have one’s humanity recognized and treated as such, all this becomes the context of struggle reflected in women’s theology’. It is the church’s responsibility to liberate women from the unjust experiences they go through in the community so that their dignity could prevail. ‘Liberation must be viewed as men and women walking together on the journey home, with the church as the umbrella of faith, hope and love.’ Through some practical pastoral care models the church may achieve wholeness, healing and liberation to widows and become an instrument of justice to widows and those who are marginalized. ‘The Church is asked to be in solidarity with women because in the body of Christ the women members (widows) are in pain, Oduyoye (1990:44).

Conclusion
This raises many challenges to the African church. The church should have proper organized counseling session in which the widow is helped to appraise herself in her new situation realistically. She should be equipped with new skills to avoid disappointments. She will need help to acquire strategies for
handling grieve without getting hopelessly broken, She should be helped on how to handle loneliness, how to make decisions and how to cope with her new responsibility as a bread winner. The church and its theology should provide refuge and emotional support acknowledging that the Christian widow is a person created in the image of God.

I have told my story; as Oduyoye rightly says:

The stories we tell of our hurts and joys are sacred. Telling them makes us vulnerable, but without sharing we cannot build community and solidarity. Our stories are precious paths on which we have walked with God and struggled for a passage to full humanity. They are events through which we have received the blessings of life from the hand of God (2001:21).

I have shared my experiences which have helped me in the healing process. This is an onward going process. What are the other stories of women we know? The women we worship with, those who have accepted to take leadership positions in our church and yet they have this as a problem, and those women who are our neighbours and belong to the same women’s group. Have they been able to share or tell their stories? Have we taken time to know what they went through? What have they experienced and what practical pastoral mechanisms have the churches they belong to put in place to help such women go through their experiences with hope? This is our challenge in the teaching of theology.

BY
Rev Gertrude Aopesyaga Kapuma
Zomba Theological College, Malawi
Email: mbusaga@yahoo.com or gakapuma@broadbandmw.com
Mobile: +265 99927 9127/ +265 88827 9127