Chapter 5
Widowhood: a story of pain, a need for healing

Gertrude Aopesyaga Kapuma

Introduction

Women are created in the image of God. Yet this is hard to believe when one sees the way they are treated in most societies, even by their family members. Abusive relationships abound and violence against women is common within our communities.

One particular passage of life is particularly fraught with danger for women: that of becoming a widow. Losing one’s partner is traumatic, but this trauma is compounded by the societal and cultural expectations of widows. With the spread of HIV&AIDS widowhood has become even more common, with women becoming widowed at an ever younger age, often also debilitated by the virus.

Despite the trauma suffered by widows and despite the fact that this status is becoming more common, widowhood remains an issue people are hesitant to speak about. Death and the dead is a topic to be avoided and people are hesitant to address and confront traditional cultural practices. This hesitancy is also present within higher institutions of theological learning. Ministers are not trained on how to support women who have lost their partners, nor are they shown how to confront cultural practices that discriminate against widows. On the contrary, ministers often do not even see what is wrong with such cultural practices. Thus widows are not supported in their time of need and the church plays no role in helping women to heal.

This chapter focuses on the issue of widowhood and widowhood practices, with the aim of highlighting the role that church leaders and churches should play in supporting widows. Church leaders have tremendous potential for educating and empowering communities to treat women in general, and widows specifically, with respect. In discussing this issue, I will draw on my personal experiences as a Chi-Chewa widow living in the southern region of Malawi. In doing so I pay heed to what Mercy 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.

My story, as well as the stories of others that I share, will serve to illustrate the plight of widows. At the same time, these stories are shared in order to highlight the support that is needed and can be provided by church leaders and the church.

Death of a husband

I became a widow when my husband died in 1998.

I lost my husband in a car accident. It happened while we were in South Africa, thus I was far removed from friends and family in Malawi. The accident occurred on a Friday and I was only informed about the accident and his death on the following Tuesday. I will not forget

1 Dean of Studies, Zomba Theological College, Malawi

the terrible week following that Tuesday, having to arrange for his remains to be taken back to Malawi.

While going through immigration at the border, the form asked for my marital status. Standing with a pen in my hand, I realised that my status had changed from married to widowed. My identity had changed without me having any choice or say in the matter. I realised that the stigma attached to widowhood will now be attached to me as well. This proved true once I arrived at home. I was a different person, friends were afraid to approach me. I was not who I used to be. I still find it difficult to adjust to the new life and lifestyle I was forced into once I became a widow.

Each type of loss brings its own kind of pain, challenges, reactions and responses. The death of a husband is a painful experience, especially unexpected death. Women are shocked and traumatised when hearing the news, especially if it is shared in an insensitive way. One young widow shared with me how she could not believe the news the police brought her when her husband was killed in a car accident. She thought that they were lying to her, that it simply could not be her husband. She demanded that they take her to see and touch him, as they “ha(d) taken (her) husband alive to the mortuary”.  

Yet the shock of realising the death of a husband is but the first of the many trials a widow has to bear. Burdens and problems that used to be shared now have to be borne alone by the widow, which can be overwhelming and stressful. Yet the trauma of death is compounded most by the cultural practices and societal expectations to which the widow is forced to submit. As Rosemary Edet highlights

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.  

Harmful Cultural Practices

There are many customs and practices that people follow when death occurs in a family. Cultural practices differ from one ethnic grouping to another and between different family clans. I am most acquainted with the practices of my own culture and my examples will draw heavily on this culture. It is important to note that these cultural practices place heavier and more burdens on widows in comparison to widowers. Many of these practices are also decidedly emotionally, physically and/or financially harmful to the widow.

Disempowering the widow

When her husband dies the woman is perceived to be unable to make any concrete decisions. Decisions are imposed on her, mostly by her family-in-law. These decisions are often not to her benefit, nor does it take her wishes into account. For example, the widow is not allowed the freedom to decide the format of her husband’s funeral. This is decided by his family. An acquaintance of mine was in a car accident with her husband. He died fairly quickly, while she continued to be kept in hospital for observation. Yet cultural practices demanded that her husband be buried immediately, due to the belief that the body of a person who died in an accident may not lay in state in the house (the way it normally does), as misfortune will then

---

3 A certain lady (name withheld) relating the story of the death of her husband at a Widows Retreat of 20th June 2002 at the University of Fort Hare.
affect the entire family and they may die. The widow desperately wanted to attend the 
funeral, especially since the manner of his dying – he suffered tremendously – was very 
traumatic to her. Yet her wishes were ignored. Cultural demands were judged as being more 
important than the needs of the widow and she could not attend the funeral of her husband. 

This disempowered state is not limited to the period immediately following the death. It 
continues, often for the rest of her life. When we talk about these experiences, she has often 
said to me: “I wish I could be at the burial – just to say goodbye to my husband.” The family 
ever thought about her, they simply did what suited them. In my case, the wish of my 
husband was to be buried in my home village. However, his family decided to bury him at his 
village against his wish and my own. Every time we go to the grave we are reminded of that 
painful decision made by in-laws.

**Widowhood cleansing**

The practice of ritual cleansing is present in many traditional African societies. It is based on 
the belief that the person most affected by the death – in this case the widow – is unclean. 
Evil spirits, agents of death, are present and she has to be purified before she can re-enter 
society. Thus rituals are performed after the death to cleanse or purify the widow. Many of 
these rituals are dangerous, especially because of the threat of HIV&AIDS, yet many 
communities continue to practice it. Fortunately, I did not have to go through this because my 
family clan and that of my husband do not practice these rituals. But even if they had asked 
for it, my position and status as a minister would have stopped them. This does not stop me to 
mention the dangerous rituals that some of my sisters (widows) have gone through.

To those that still practice this ritual, the mourning process is perceived to be incomplete if 
the widow does not undergo the process of widowhood cleansing. The most common 
cleansing ritual in Malawi is what is called *kupita kufa* or *kuchotsa fumbi*. Literally it means 
“taking away dust after death”. With this practice a man is identified in the community to 
perform the ritual of cleansing. He is paid to do this. The man chosen is often one who is 
mentally unstable or someone generally ostracised by the community. His role is then to 
have sexual intercourse with the widow. This is believed to cleanse her from the evil spirits 
that caused the death in the family.

No one in the family seems to question this practice. How is sexual intercourse supposed to 
get rid of evil spirits? Why is it the widow that must have sex in order to cleanse the whole 
family? Why is a random man used to do this and why is he paid? This practice shows no 
respect for the widow. On the contrary, she loses her dignity and integrity by being forced to 
have sex with a man she did not choose herself. She also runs a great risk of contracting, or 
spreading, HIV&AIDS and/or other STIs.

This process of widowhood cleansing is arranged by the widow’s in-laws and she is not 
consulted, or her consent asked for, at any stage. On the contrary, the community in general, 
especially the older women, show support for the practice. Young widows find no support 
when they want to object to the practice, often because the older widows want to ensure that 
others go through the same rituals they did. Even if this practice clashes with Christian 
doctrine, widows are advised to uphold their cultural identity. In Kenya a recently widowed 
woman was advised by an older widow, who claimed to be a born-again Christian, that she should not 
follow Christianity blindly, but that “when it (came) to Luo tradition (she should) make sure that 
(she) put (her) house in order”. When she asked what was meant by this, she was told to “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”.

---

**Financial implications**

Even if a husband provided for his wife in the event of his death, widows cannot always be sure that they will have access to that provision. A widow cannot even be sure that she will be allowed to keep the money and property that she herself worked for and earned. If an inheritance is available – such as a house, cars, cattle or money – the widow’s family-in-law often lays claim to it. This is done in two ways. The widow herself can be inherited by a male member of her dead husband’s family. Forcing her to marry him, the family-in-law gains control of the property and children. In many cases with the absence of a ‘will’ the family-in-laws may simply take everything, leaving the widow behind to fend for herself.

This happened to a friend of mine. At the death of her husband his family came to her house and proceeded to share amongst themselves all of the property, including a car. Luckily the widow could at least report the car as stolen as it was registered in her name, and it was returned to her.

Society expects that the costs of the death and burial be carried by the widow, in cases where the deceased was working and it is assumed that the widow has money. These expenses are not limited to the funeral. For example, a widow is expected to erect a tombstone for her husband one year after this death. Sometimes this is done without any financial assistance from her dead husband’s family. Cultural beliefs state that the soul of her husband will haunt her otherwise. Thus many widows are forced into crippling debt by having to pay for the tombstone. Before one year I consulted my father-in-law about erecting the tombstone of my husband. I was shocked with his response which indicated that it was my sole responsibility to make sure that this was done. My brother-in-law further said that this assignment was costly and that I should be ready for the cost. Eventually this proved true and I was only supported by my family members.

Churches are not addressing this issue. While some churches may try to intervene with some widowhood rituals, the financial abuse of widows is rarely been addressed by churches.

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 principles.7

It is not only a widow’s family-in-law that may abuse her. Her own family may do the same. Some widows are sent back to their parents’ home with nothing and thus forced into a miserable life. Their own families often fail to provide for them, even though they are destitute. Sent away from the life she knew, she arrives with nothing, having to provide for herself and her children with no means of support. She becomes a stranger in her own village among her own people and many times she becomes dependant of the parents if they are still living.

**Isolation from the world**

Widowhood leads to the woman having to reposition herself within society. Both cultural practices relating to widowhood but also cultural views on widowhood serve to create an entirely new identity, role and position for the widow within her community and broader society.

Firstly, the widow is physically isolated, with people avoiding her after the burial. Owiti indicates that “…after the burial you don’t see a single church member coming to visit. You

are left in a very, very lonely situation”. Many widows have said that this isolation was the most torturous experience they have ever gone through. The widow is expected to be silent and should not be seen talking to anyone: this is perceived as one of the virtues of a good grieving widow. She is restricted socially: she is not allowed to visit other homes or even shake hands with people. Thus the widow is forced to be alone and lonely in a time that she is arguably in most need of support and companionship. This is so traumatic that it can lead to depression and affect her physical health.

Widows are expected to undergo cultural rituals and practices without questioning it, even though these rituals might isolate them and/or not be a reflection of their feelings. For example, according to some cultural traditions the widow cannot eat with others and in some traditions she is only allowed to use old plates which will be destroyed after the rituals are done. To an extent these cultural rituals become a circus, with the rest of the community observing and checking to see whether the widow does adhere to it. Fulata Moyo, for example, was accused of not crying loudly for everybody to notice that she was the widow. This case suggests that often people do not come to comfort the widow at a difficult time, but rather come to observe whether she adheres to the cultural expectations of a grieving widow.

Of course, people’s inability to talk to widows is not always because of cultural constraints, but also because of ignorance and/or ineptness in knowing how to talk to someone in grief. People are uncomfortable with death and those affected by it. One of my friends told me that she found it difficult to talk with me during the period after my husband died, as she felt she did not know what to say to me. I could not understand the difficulty – why could we not talk about the things we used to talk about? If she felt that talking about husbands was a sensitive issue, there remained many other topics as our friendship was not restricted to talking about our husbands. Yet every time we met she would only tell me that I was ‘looking good’. Afterwards she explained that she kept on expecting me to look different and not be presentable. I had to look like someone who was mourning.

Widows’ isolation is compounded – paradoxically – by the fact that they are forced to be so visible. She is forced to wear black during the mourning period and not allowed to wear anything fancy or attention-grabbing. Some cultures expect widows to cover their heads with a black scarf, while others expect widows to shave their heads. Thus the widow is instantly noticeable and cannot escape the stigma of her widowhood. It also allows the community to easily monitor her movements and behaviour, constantly checking whether she is adhering to cultural standards.

My own brother expected me to wear only black after the death of my husband. When I did not, he went to my mother demanding to know why I was not following cultural practices. This made me very angry when I heard about it – why did he go to my mother and not come directly to me? My mother supported me, as she had also refused to wear black after the death of her husband. Yet my brother did not understand and refused to be satisfied. In the end I confronted him, explaining that I did not ask for the situation I was in and that I found no reason to show society what I was going through by wearing mourning clothes. At the time he still did not understand, but after some time had passed he apologised to me. Yet this

---


whole situation meant that, in a time that I was in need of support, my own brother could not look pass cultural protocol long enough to reach out and help his sister.

**Repositioning within society**

While a married woman is a person with respect and standing within a community, the moment her husband dies she becomes a sexualised being, a threat to the church and society. As a single woman the widow (again) experiences what single women go through. She is not free to talk to any man, not even the minister who can assist her in her grief. She must not speak to men otherwise she is perceived as enticing and seducing them. Whenever she has to talk to a man, she has to ensure that she has someone present. Her interaction with her social networks is curtailed as she is under observation by the community. If the widow has a job these restrictions cause even more problems, as one cannot work with women only, especially not if you are a pastor like me. I experienced that people have concluded that my relationship with males was not professional but intimate. I am very aware that male colleagues do not feel comfortable in my presence. They cannot visit me alone unless they are accompanied by a friend or wife. I have learnt to be careful in order not to embarrass people. However, one has a feeling that married people can talk freely but as a widow you are avoided. Many times I feel isolated.

**Impact on children.**

A woman who has children not only has to deal with her own trauma at the death of husband, but also that of her children. She has to support them both psychologically and physically.

My daughter had problems accepting the passing away of her father. In the time prior to his death I was concentrating on my studies, thus much of the child-rearing responsibilities were taken over by my husband. One result of this was that he and my daughter became very close. Not only was this relationship taken from her at his death, but she also had to go to boarding school in the following year, even though she was still very young. I remember her being sad, wishing that her father could fetch her from school when the holidays came, as all her friends’ fathers were fetching them.

Helping her children adjust and go on with life without their father is the biggest challenge facing a widow. Firstly she has to help them deal with the psychological pain, helping them understand why he is no longer there and assisting them in dealing with the pain of separation. Difficult questions are asked and the widow is the one who has to answer, even though it might be questions that she herself is struggling with.

In situations where the widow is stripped of her property and forced to relocate, she has to also help her children adjust to the new circumstances and environment. There might be a drastic fall in their financial situation, and they have to adjust to new friends and (even) family.

Lastly, children are affected by seeing how their mother is treated as a widow. It affects a child to see his/her family and community members mistreat and disrespect his/her mother. This can have many different consequences. Some children become depressed and unable to perform at school. Others become rebellious and angry, sometimes even venting that anger on their mothers. Other children see the way their mothers are treated and internalise it, accepting it as the way women should be treated. This affects the way they structure and run their own families one day.

**Widowhood as a theological issue**
Widowhood is a theological issue because it deals with human dignity. Genesis tells us that both sexes were created in the image of God. Later in this book there will be ample references to biblical passages and theological arguments dealing with gender equality. We need to look at our theology and see what we can do to address this issue. What does God say about widows? How can dignity be restored to these women when they read scripture? What mechanisms or systems are there in the Church to help and assist widows in their experience of pain as well as their healing?

In June 2002 I conducted a Widows’ Retreat in the community of Fort Hare University in South Africa. This was the participants’ first ever opportunity of sharing what they have experienced as widows. The stories shared by these widows were heart rending. There were some who have been widowed for more than 20 years and were still waiting for their husbands to return. There were some who were afraid to sleep alone in a room, because of all the nightmares they get.

We need our theology to be able to address the realities and problems of these widows. How can they even begin to understand the liberation wrought by a God who was so particular about widows and their problems, if we as a church do not address it? Our theology and our churches should give recognition to and address the experiences and realities of women. Oduyoye 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.10

The church can intervene in the plight of widows in different ways:

**Addressing misuse of the Bible and theology**

The Bible is often quoted incorrectly and/or out of context, or misinterpreted, in order to provide comfort to widows. But this often has the opposite result, with the widow beginning to question God and her faith.

When my husband died, whenever I approached my fellow Christian women for comfort or support, I was repeatedly told that I was not alone. Quoting Isaiah 54:4-5, they pointed out that I am now married to God:

> 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.

I was also reminded that Jesus Christ was now the father of my children and that I could and should ask him for anything.

This ‘support’ led to me questioning theology and biblical interpretation. I was made even more vulnerable by these women and their words. They were trying to help, but were adding to my pain, and my vulnerability in becoming widowed. It made me rebellious because I was suffering from pain and isolation. I read Isaiah passage repeatedly. How does it apply to widows only? What about the single women and married women, is God not their husband also? I could not understand their interpretation of the passage, which made me question my own faith and understanding.

---

Most Christians are guilty of misusing or misinterpreting Biblical texts, even ministers. The church needs to engage more with the issue of death, widows and widowers, in order to give church members better theological framework to deal with these issues. What is said and done to widows are in many cases more culturally induced than biblically. This has to be countered in theological discourses.

**Show solidarity with women**

It is the church’s responsibility to liberate women from the unjust experiences they go through in the community. The church is a critically important agent in achieving a society in which women’s equality and dignity is recognised. If the dignity and importance of women in general is not recognised, the plight of widows cannot be addressed. The church has to identify and side with women, not only in order to better the situation of widows, but because it is their Christian duty to be in solidarity with those that are in pain.

**Liberate women by opposing cultural practices that discriminate**

Many churches have disciplinary protocols and actions in place that discipline members who do not follow the rules, practices and procedures of the given church. Yet churches should also put in place practical measures to counter the injustices that widows face. Issues mentioned in this paper can and should be addressed with disciplinary measures against, for example, the illegally “inheritance” of the property of a deceased when it is making the widow and her children suffer?

**Give women room to tell their stories**

The church is called to listen to the stories being told by women, of their experiences of abuse and pain, of the struggles women go through and how these can be tabled to bring positive change. Finca witnesses how the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission helped people through listening to the stories that were being told or uncovered by different people. It was not easy because the experience was painful to both the listener and the victim. He observed that the process of telling the story helped many to begin to heal or reconcile with the past. He says “Telling your story of obedience to a higher goal is a liberating act. You bless your memories of pain and struggle as you fit together in one picture the act of liberation”.

**Provide practical pastoral care**

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 marginalised. The church should provide mechanisms or special facilities that can help and assist widows to heal and liberate themselves from unfortunate and negative widowhood experiences.

The Western community generally has counselling facilities and medical support available to widows. Wills are usually made and generally provide for the widow. The community also tends to be accepting of widows remarrying. In African societies, on the other hand, this is usually not the case. Widows are isolated and expected to go through painful experiences on top of the trauma of losing a husband.

The church should be providing the counselling and emotional support that widows need, both immediately after the death of a husband but also in the long term. This raises many

---

challenges to the African church. The church should have properly organised counselling available, in which the widow is helped to appraise herself realistically in her new situation. She should be equipped with new skills to help her deal with her new reality. She needs help in acquiring strategies for handling grief.

Conclusion

In most African cultures the church and contextualized theology should work at providing refuge and emotional support for widows as people created in the image of God whose human dignity is at stake. It should also provide practical interventions countering the cultural beliefs and practices that subjugate widows.

I have shared my story of what have hampered me and what have helped me in dealing with the death of my husband. It is a continuing process and one that has been healing. The challenge is to allow this space for all widows, so that healing can also be achieved for them.