

THE DILEMMA OF THE ABAGUSII WIDOWS IN THE SEVENTH DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH, ITUMBE STATION – SOUTH KENYA CONFERENCE

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Abstract

This study aimed to find out the dilemma of the Abagusii widows in the Seventh Day Adventist church, Itumbe station-South Kenya conference. Itumbe Station of the Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) church has 1551 widows. The argument of this study is that the death of a husband impacts every aspect of a widow's life, together with the orphaned children left to her. Most of the Abagusii widows within the SDA church undergo very difficult dilemmas of life: discriminatory regards to isolation, condemnation, stigmatisation, poor access to basic services like healthcare, material poverty, psychosocial trauma, demoralisation, fearfulness, emptiness, helplessness, and abandonment to loneliness. They have lost their dignity, which is against the position of Jesus, who showed zero discrimination to any member of society. Informed by Family Systems Theory, the study claims that solutions to the reality of widowhood are neither just doctrinal nor one-sided. The SDA church should be fully involved through the strengthening of pastoral care ministry and possibly through the creation of a specific ministry for widows, for it is the mission of the church to take care of widows, offering them solidarity, comfort, and consolation.

Key terms: Dignity, mistreatment, pastoral ministry, remarriage, support systems.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

There is an increasing number of widowed people and orphaned families in the church all over the world, without accurate numbers. However, with the dwindling global economy and scarce resources, the affected widows are not able to attend to their basic needs; they are totally left without spousal love, care, and social security. In a determinative way, Eboiyehi and Akinyemi (2016) specify a myriad of challenges that widows go through, which include isolation and poor access to basic services like healthcare, material needs, psychosocial trauma, and abandonment even in the church. Also, the children under their care are not insulated from these challenges. These specifications imply that widows do not only need material provisions but also other needs that are unquantifiable, which the Christian community should pay attention to. They also raise the need for church support systems that directly benefit widows and the children left to them by their dead husbands. As it was in the early church, the modern church cannot passively watch the plight of the vulnerable members of society without offering any solution.

From a global perspective, a study by Carr and Utz (2002) explained that in the US, a majority of widows never receive help and therefore live in deplorable conditions. After the burial of their husbands, family members, funeral committees, friends, and even Christian communities depart and rarely come back to help them with caregiving responsibilities. Instead, they are left lonely, isolated, and depressed, with no financial help. This reality is reiterated by the Loomba Foundation (2016), which indicates that the US ranks the highest in the world with more than 14 million widowed people, of whom more than 740,000 are unable to provide themselves with the basic necessities of life. Having no alternatives to a dignified human life, many widows resort to forbidden practices like cohabitation and prostitution for individual self-fulfilment.

The United Nations Report (2001) indicated that in Asia, widowhood is regarded as a curse, and therefore widows are disregarded by members of society, including their close relatives (UN Report, 2001). This leaves many widows with the liability of solely caring for their children with virtually no help from relatives, friends, or even the church. They are deprived of many opportunities and stigmatised, which is exacerbated by ritual and religious rites. For those that opt to remarry, upon remarriage, they have to relinquish guardianship of their children as well as any other property rights they may have. Because of the negative cultural attitude towards widowhood, there are low rates of remarriage among widows, making street begging and prostitution a common way of life for younger widows, while their young partial-orphaned children are forced to enter the labour force to support their widowed mothers and other orphaned siblings (Chandrakant et al., 2015).

In Africa, the situation of widows is not that different. A study by Bass and Kanabus (2004) pointed out that because of a lack of social support systems, widows are compelled to sell their own children into slavery, prostitution, or other forms of child abuse in order to help them shoulder household responsibilities. For instance, a survey conducted by World Public Opinion (2009) indicated that 33 per cent of Nigerian widows face discrimination from society, family, and the church compared to other women outside the church. Those who opt for levirate unions are condemned by the church. In Zambia, a study by Varga (2006) indicates that due to HIV/AIDS, many women are widowed, and 15 per cent of children are

orphaned. While the study by UNICEF (2004) indicated that over one million Zambian children lost their fathers, 19 per cent of those under the age of 18 lost their fathers, leaving women with the responsibility of orphan care. While a report by the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (2016) estimated 8 million widows, encompassing almost 15 per cent of the entire population, a majority of these widows live in rural settings, living in extreme poverty. The dilemma that informed this study is that most of these widows join and participate in church activities, where it is expected that the churches they belong to will address their plight and assist them in adjusting to and coping with the psychosocial challenges that come with the death of a family member. But this is not the case; instead, they are undermined, stigmatised, and left alone without much support of any kind (Miruka et al., 2015). Further, there are church orphaned children's homes that cater for the orphans in the provision of food, medical care, education, and clothing, even though those provisions are not enough to properly cater for the many orphans. But there are no such provisions for the widows, which leaves them unprotected from such a lack. Instead, the church is so silent about the care of widows in the various aspects of their needs; she invests less in widows who shoulder the heavy responsibility of taking care of the children left to them by their departed partner. Widow care is not fully implemented in Christian churches, as there are no structures specifically designed to take care of widows in the church (Miruka et al., 2015).

According to Bichang'a (2014), Itumbe SDA church Station has 1551 widows, but because of the hard situation as a result of no support systems from the church, Abagusii people who are also Christians in the SDA church, in some clandestine manner, practice levirate union as a way of caring for the widow and her children, despite the church's disapproval of the practice. Those who openly opt for a levirate union regardless of their role in the church are victimised and forced to migrate to other places to avoid stigmatisation. The unfortunate thing is that the church condemns Levirate to practise, but at the same time, her responsibilities of caring for the widows have declined or even been absent. This leaves widowed members of the church without proper care.

But then most of them undergo within the church very difficult situations in life: discriminatory regards, isolation, poor access to basic services like healthcare, material poverty, psychosocial trauma, demoralisation, fearfulness, emptiness, helplessness, and abandonment to loneliness. The widows in the SDA church appear to have lost their dignity, which is against the position of Jesus, who showed zero discrimination to any member of society. This state of affairs merited this study on the dilemma encountered by the Abagusii widow in the Seventh Day Adventist church in Itumbe Station, South Kenya Conference.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The reality of widowhood is worrying. Fleet (2012) argue that instead of being taken care of by society and respective institutions, most widows are left alone after the death of their spouses, sometimes without any support systems, including affective areas of life. This has serious consequences for their psychosocial well-being and economic sphere of life. In a determinative way, Eboiyehi and Akinyemi (2016) specified a myriad of challenges that come with the loss of the husband, where the widow is faced with discriminatory realities of isolation and poor access to basic services like healthcare, material needs, psychosocial trauma, and abandonment to loneliness even in the church. Also, the children under the care of the widowed are

not insulated from this negative reality. The enumeration of various needs of both widows and orphaned children implies that these groups of people do need not only material provisions but also other needs that are unquantifiable that the Christian community should pay attention to.

Thurston (1989), in his study, explains that the early Christian Church took care of widows and orphaned children; therefore, the modern church cannot passively watch the plight of the vulnerable members of society without offering any solution. However, Thurston (1989) focused only on the material provisions, thus leaving out other aspects of the widows' needs. Nevertheless, in disagreement with Thurston (1989), Kavenly (2006) restated that the early church did not limit its involvement with the widows to only material support nor allowed them to be merely passive members in the community; through an Order of Widows the church recognised the contribution that the widows could make to the well-being and spiritual development of the church believers. In his holistic regard, Kavenly argued that widows are resourceful members who, through the order of widows, involved themselves in the pastoral ministry of the church, like house visitations, where they consoled and prayed with the sick members of the Christian community who felt desolate, giving them hope of life-based on their own experiences as widows; widows also gave practical teachings to younger women on how to support their families in times of suffering. By involving widows in the life of the Christian church, they are made useful members of society, and it gives them hope that not all is lost to the death of their husbands.

Neufeld (2008) informs us that with the help and support of the community and the family, widows can be healed emotionally, physically, and spiritually. Usha (2002) postulated that in Holland, almost every Christian community has structures that are supported through the offerings of the members and that there are church communities that help members that experience conjugal bereavement due to the death of one spouse.

However, the same study points out that even in the church, widows who are under the care of Christian communities are sometimes subjected to various kinds of suffering and mistreatment. This sentiment was raised by Peterman (2012), who underscored that widows face discrimination in asset inheritance, leading to poverty for themselves and their children. Peterman does not indicate the kind of mistreatment or discrimination that widows go through, nor does he give clear measures to resolve the implied hardships widows go through. Human Rights Watch (2010) observed that many widows in Kenya suffer a lot of economic hardships after the death of their husbands, especially when he was the sole breadwinner. This results in a situation where the grieving widow begins to live a lonely and desperate life in an unfamiliar and solitary state, in need of social support from the community. The study by Owen (2010) postulates that widows are being excluded in many areas of their lives, including socio-religious aspects. While Dube (2019) and Peterman (2012) lament that widows suffer social exclusion and marginalisation upon the death of their partners, they also face discrimination in asset inheritance, leading to poverty for themselves and their children. There is also the abandonment of widows by either the family or the Christian community.

But the vulnerability of widows calls for the church to institute particular support systems that go beyond material provisions to guarantee that widows are decently cared for; systems that are aimed at increasing widows' social engagements and activities that assist them to overcome the psychological distress related

to the loss of their marriage partners. This is recapped by Collins (2002), who urges the Christian community to stand up and support widows. For young widows with children with deceased husbands, the church has an evangelical obligation to assist them in responsibly taking care of the children under their custody. The same is reiterated by Asuamah (2012) and Waruta and Kinoti (2002), who assert that it is the responsibility of the church to offer professional pastoral counselling to widows and exalt the church to empower the widows to become women capable of keeping their own families. The notified gap in this literature is that it does not give an elaborate type of Church support system like home-bound programs and link teams that help widows cope with challenges of their reality; they are mere spiritual exaltations that do not go deep to enlist what the church does or should actually do to help the widows.

Although there are other studies by Jackson (2009) and Shorter and Onyancha (1998) that discuss church programs and orphanages for orphaned children and encourage that the church instead should have home-bound programs and home-bound link teams, these studies do not talk about widows who are charged with the responsibility of caring for the children left to them by their late husbands. This is an indication that there are no such Church programs and homes for the widows, raising a critical existential dilemma for them. The studies undermined the care of the widow affected by the loss of the spouse, who is now expected to solely face all the responsibilities for the care of children. These studies emphasise church programs for the care of orphaned children, but they do not take into account the situation of a widowed parent that should also be supported so that she decently takes care of her orphaned children; they are silent about the situation of the widows and the support they need to properly bring up the children. This situation is stressed by Chauke (2003), who observes that churches in Zimbabwe take a detached stance in the care of widows who are supposed to take care of the children under their responsibility. Bellamy (2005) also asserts that the silence and inaction from the Christian community that surround widowhood for proper care of themselves and their children are morally reprehensible and unacceptable. When widows are not taken care of by the church and other institutions, then the question is: Who does the church expect to take care of them? This gives the rationale for other cultural systems, like levirate unions, to take up that responsibility.

Self-help initiatives are another important support system that plays a fundamental role in helping widows cope with and overcome the challenges that come with the loss of their spouses. On this, Beach et al. (2000) informed that widows need to change from seeing themselves as married to thinking of themselves as widowed, learning to make decisions independently, learning to be alone and make friends, and joining associations that enable them to be out with people. Vitelli (2015) recommended that for widows to get over the hardships of grief and loneliness, they need to seek their own social support systems, which sometimes may point towards levirate marriage unions. There are biblical foundations to this, particularly in the story of Abigail, who chose to follow David after the death of her husband, Nabal, and later became David's wife (1 Samuel 25:42). After seven days of mourning, Bathsheba, the widow of Uriah, also became the wife of David, though the thing David did displeased God (2 Samuel 11:27). Young widows who opt to remarry should be encouraged by the Christian community to do so. But it should be noted that remarriage should not be considered from a myopic perspective of material support to the widow; rather, it should be looked at from a wider perspective of a holistic consideration of the widow's life.

Self-help support systems enable them to cope with their own reality of widowhood, offering them solidarity, comfort, and consolation. Such self-help programmes give direct advice, encouragement, ideas, and support and emphasise the need for the widows to act for themselves in times when they need direction; they give them a greater sense of independence and self-worth. The study by Kaori (2007) explained that widows benefit from social support groups since they enable them to be socially active and resilient after the death of their spouses; they need to be socially engaged through group networks and activities. Kane (2017) argued that such social groups enable widows to grow by accepting their current situation and enabling them to participate in communal activities such as luncheons, social parties, community activities, neighbours' networks, village or estate merry-go-rounds, and investment groups.

Mwangi (2014) explained that widows lack the necessary support systems in terms of family, friends, and professionals that could help them cope with the loss of their spouses and the task of solely raising children. While Miruka et al. (2015) add that widows are not fully cared for in Christian churches; they are made to feel neglected and suffer within the church and in the larger society; they suffer from a lack of self-esteem and loneliness since they do not have groups to identify themselves with.

3.0 METHODS

The study investigated the dilemma encountered by the Abagusii widow in the Seventh Day Adventist church in Itumbe Station, South Kenya Conference. Precisely, it considered participants' perspectives on various constructs within specific dilemmas encountered by widows in the SDA church. The study used the Family Systems Theory, which argues that solutions to the reality of widowhood are not just doctrinal nor one-sided. The target study population was 774 respondents from the 8 districts that constitute the SDA church in Itumbe Station, while the sample size was 250 informants. This sample size was determined following the advice of Mugenda and Mugenda (2003), who suggest that a sample size of 30 per cent is preferable for a target population of less than 1,000. This is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: The Sample Size

Target group	Target Population	Sampling procedure	Sample size	Percentage
Widows	406	Simple Random	122	49%
Family Members	200	Simple Random	60	24%
Pastors	8	Censors	8	3%
Abagusii Leaders	80	Purposive	30	12%
Family Life Leaders	80	Purposive	30	12%
Total	774		250	100%

Source: Field Data, 2023

As illustrated in Table 1 above, the engagement of various groups of participants was to obtain a significant and inclusive representation of the respondents to cater for various viewpoints and experiences on the reality of the widows in the study area. Consequently, the sample size for the entire study was 250 informants. In the collection of data, a questionnaire (for 62 widows, 60 family members, and 30 church

family life leaders, for a total of 152 participants), interviews (for 38 participants, 8 pastors, and 30 Abagusii leaders), and focused group discussions (for 60 respondents) were used.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

To enable a whole-round discussion of the study findings, results from both the questionnaire and interviews on the dilemma encountered by the Abagusii widow in the Seventh Day Adventist church in Itumbe Station, South Kenya Conference, were considered. Results from the questionnaires were obtained and discussed thematically, guided by a Likert scale format of 5–1, where SD = Strongly disagree, D = Disagree, N = Neutral, A = Agree, and SA = Strongly agree. This was centred on the involvement of widows in the pastoral ministry, the provision of health care and material support, the empowerment of widows in the church, condemnation from the church, isolation and marginalisation from the Christian community, ex-communication from the church, silence from the church on the plight of widows, stigmatisation, abandonment, anger, and an emphasis on remarriage or remaining single. The discussion of the results was based on two fundamental areas: Church widow support systems and the attitude of the church towards widows. The figure below displays the results.

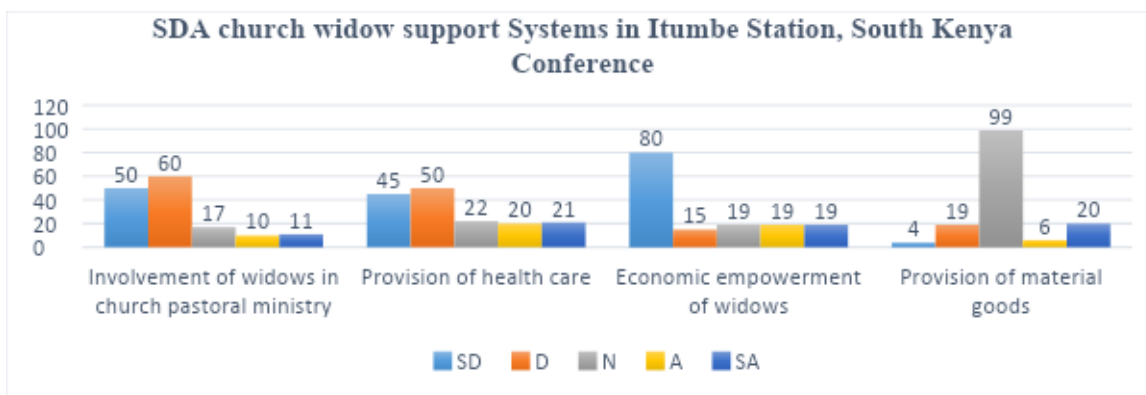


Figure 1: SDA Church Widow Support System in Itumbe Station, South Kenya Conference

Source: Field Data, 2023

On the inclusion of widows in the ministry of the church, the responses from the field showed that 110 (74.3%) were in disagreement, 17 (11.5%) were undecided, and a minority of 21 (14.2%) were in agreement with the thesis. Those who are in agreement with the thesis that women are included in the ministry of the church had the following:

Widows are always participating in the life of the church. They are involved in Sabbath school for the children and in the charity work of the church. These widows follow the example of the widow of Dorcas in the Bible, who dedicated her life to serving other widows and orphans (Interviewee 5).

While another participant observed:

It is wrong to think of widows as people who only need our material help. They are active members of the church who dedicate their time to visit and console other widows who are going through the same hardships they underwent. In so doing, they encourage others who may be thinking that to serve in the church, one has to have material things to give." (Interviewee, 17)

However, there were those of a different opinion. For instance, a participant in the FGDs disputed: I don't consider myself fully involved in the church. As widows, we are never pictured in the leadership of the church. We are always seen as people who are out to lure men into marriage. This biased misconception pushes us away from the church (FGD 15).

Echoing this sentiment, another informant asserted:

The involvement of widows in the ministry of the church is only nominal. The practical aspect of what is said is yet to be achieved. Widows are looked at negatively, and many of the church members do not want to associate themselves with the widows (Interviewee 8).

The findings indicated that widows are not fully engaged in the final ministry of the church, even though they may be willing to commit themselves to the evangelism ministry of the church; widows are not given that space in the church. This denies them the fulfilment they could receive from the church and the feeling of being active and beneficial to the church. For example, according to each one's capabilities, some widows can be allocated to take care of orphans and children in the local church community and care for the afflicted in the community (1 Tim. 5:10). By so doing, both widows and the local church community work positively towards the holistic approach of God to humanity because both of them donate themselves positively towards the physical, emotional, and spiritual development of the church and the entire community.

The sentiments raised in the field findings were critical because widows are resourceful church members who, through the order of widows, can involve themselves in the pastoral ministry of the church in areas like house visitations and spiritual counselling, where they can console and pray with the sick members of the Christian community who feel desolate, giving them hope of life-based on their own experiences as widows. As well, from their experience, they can give practical teachings to younger widows on how to support their families in times of suffering, like death. This engagement of widows in the pastoral ministry of the church makes them useful members of the church, which reciprocally gives them the hope that not all is lost to the death of their dear husbands.

The absence of such a useful platform denies them the opportunity to make their lives and experiences meaningful to the church. Any contextualised ministry for widows should entail what the church is doing to enrich widows that are in its congregation, as well as a ministry by the widows themselves for themselves and others in the church. Such a widows-led ministry is able to realistically address the reality of the widows, thereby giving a justification for denouncing any practice like levirate unions that, in a practical manner, attends to the situation of widows.

On the provision of health care, 95 (64.2%) of the respondents were in disagreement, 22 (14.7%) were neutral, and 31 (20.9%) were of the opinion that the church does provide health services to the widows. This was reiterated in the interview schedules, where a participant informed:

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The church has support systems and programmes for widows. It provides widows with good health care; occasionally, doctors are invited to various church centres to provide cancer screening and checking of sugar levels and high blood pressure, which is done free of charge (Interviewee 3).

However, the results from the interviews and FGDs were not in agreement with the idea that widows get good health services from the church's medical facilities and programmes. The informant from the interview schedules reported:

As widows, we appreciate the free and sometimes less costly medical services we get from the church, but it is also important to say that they are basic services. When one gets a serious illness [in her home, maybe herself or the child] that requires specialised attention, the church disappears, and the widow, who has practically nothing left on herself (FGD 42).

The sentiments raised were that since the widow has no property or source of income after her husband's, she depends on both the community and the family, as well as the local Christian community of the church. But in the practical sense, especially during times of health difficulties, this is not the case. This contradicts the very reality of the church's teachings, where the well-being of widows is given the highest priority by both the Christian community and this contradicts the very reality of the church's teachings, where the well-being of widows is given the highest priority by both the Christian community and the widows' families. Basic health services are important, but they are not enough to cover the health problems that recur every time.

On the provision of basic material needs like food, shelter, and education, the results in Figure 1 indicated that 23 (15.5%) did not agree that the church fully takes charge of this service of provision of material needs; 99 (66.9%) of the respondents, which is the majority, were undecided, not having clear knowledge of the church's role in this aspect of widows' lives; and 26 (17.6%) were in agreement that the church indeed provides for the material needs of the widows in Itumbe Station, South Kenya Conference. Acknowledging what the church does for them, discussants in the FGDs informed:

The material support we get from the church community comes in the form of individual charitable donations like second-hand clothes and little food that lasts for a day or two, which is not enough (FGDs 18).

The finding is in agreement with Clinton (2008), who observed that young widows receive inadequate support systems from the church, family, and friends, leaving them with the task of shouldering all the responsibilities of raising children under their care on their own. Another participant in the interviews noted:

When it comes to the provision of shelter, we must acknowledge that it takes a long time for the Christian community to respond; widows who are affected in the community leave under deplorable conditions when it comes to the question of shelter. When their houses collapse, widows and children are rained on and exposed to severe cold; this takes place under the watch of local church community leaders. It takes lots of energy to mobilise the Christian community to rebuild a semi-permanent structure (Interviewee 9).

While on the issue of education, this was alarming, as almost all participants in the FGDS had to say:

Our children are at home without going to school due to a lack of very basic educational items like exercise books, pens, and uniforms. The government says that there is free education, but there is nothing of the sort. Children are sent home now and then to collect money for tuition. All these things as widows, we cannot afford since we are busy looking for food to feed them, as they cannot be in school without food. Our children are condemned to a life of ignorance, and their future is jeopardised by a lack of basic education (FGDs 28).

Given the massive levels of poverty within Itumbe Station, the findings demonstrated that most of the widows lamented their struggles to make ends meet and the challenges of adequately providing for their children and other dependents using small incomes, which they often supplemented with returns from the sales of subsistence produce, irregular gifts, and hand-outs from friends and well-wishers. Many reported that they even fear joining local private financial institutions because they lack the security or prerequisite collateral to get meaningful, sizeable cash amounts that are necessary to return profits; they fear having their meagre property confiscated if they fail to repay the borrowed loans in time.

The findings of the study, therefore, implied that the widows in the SDA church at Itumbe Station are more vulnerable since some of them depend solely on the alms collected and the goodwill of the people. This unstructured manner in which the SDA church in Itumbe Station responds to the needy widows gives them an opening whereby they do not receive full tangible support. Even though a structured manner of caring for needy widows may have its shortcomings, like in the case of widows in Jerusalem (1 Timothy 5:3–16), it is a form of widow care that cannot be ignored. Of course, individual initiatives are important, but for better control purposes, the structured mode, if well-coordinated, is more inclusive. However, the findings corresponded with those of KapumaL (2011), which state that the churches do not address the financial issues that plague the widows during and after their husband's burial; low economic status affects widows' well-being in a negative way.

On economic empowerment, the study looked at the church's provision of financial support to widows for their economic development, training of widows for economic development, and entrepreneurial sensitisation workshops and seminars to empower widows in the church. The results were as specified in Figure 1 above, where 95 (64.2%) of the respondents were in disagreement with the SDA church economically empowering widows; 15 (10.1%) of the respondents were undecided; and 38 (25.7%) supported the thesis that the SDA church economically empowers women. Collectively, participants in the FGDs argued:

Financial support for widows contributes directly to the economic development of their families and the Christian community at large; however, the SDA church plays a minimal role in this area. There are no microfinance institutions owned by the church where we can go and get loans to grow ourselves economically (FGDs 33).

The argument concurs with the sentiments of one of the participants in the FGDs, who lamentably said: The training we get from the church is more about spiritual development and family life. There is no training or sensitisation of members on economic development. This is left to the purview of individual widows without support from the church. Some of us individually have attended training and economic

skill development sensitisation workshops organised by the governments, but what can such training do without capital to initiate economic projects? (FGDs 43)

Involving widows in economic activities is one way of building self-confidence, improving skills, and fulfilling their multifaceted needs through collective church action. The findings suggest that economic empowerment, financial empowerment, and entrepreneurial skill development are important since they provide them with various avenues to access information and enable them to be self-reliant. This was earlier affirmed by Human Rights Watch (2010), which informed that many widows in Kenya grieve through a lot of economic hardships after the death of their husbands, especially when he was the sole breadwinner. But unfortunately, the SDA church is not fully engaged in finding ways to financially empower the affected widows in her membership.

Lacking an economic plan for widows consequently implies that they cannot develop their knowledge and initiatives, which in essence, condemns the widows to perpetual poverty and beggars in the church. The reluctance of the SDA church to empower widows financially diminishes their ability and the avenues through which widows can seek financial help. The SDA church does not take care of the widows by initiating income-generating projects to empower them. It does not do table banking, whereby the widows can borrow money for their self-sustenance and therefore relieve the church of burden.

Having analysed SDA church widow support systems, the study went further to discuss the attitude and regard of the church towards the widows. On the basis of this, the study identified five areas where the respondents were asked to express their perceptions, views, experiences, feelings, and regard for the SDA church's widow support systems in Itumbe Station. Figure 2 below presents the results:

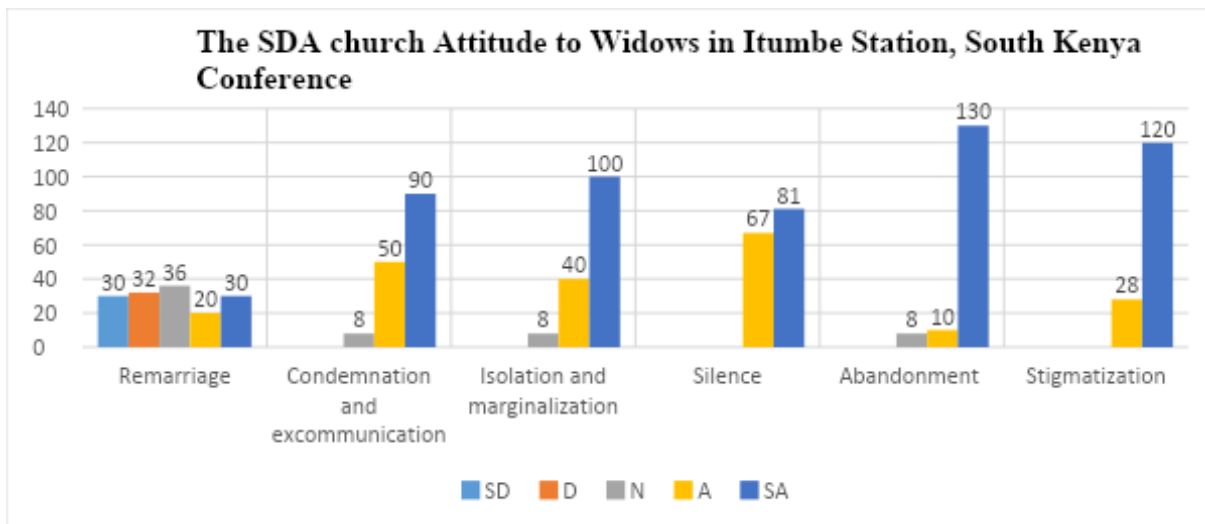


Figure 2: The SDA Church Attitude to Widows in Itumbe Station, South Kenya Conference
Source: Field data, 2023

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The results in Figure 2 above indicated that on the theme of remarriage, 62 (42.9%) of the respondents disagreed that remarriage could be a widow support system, 36 (24.3%) were undecided, and 50 (33.8%) were in agreement that remarriage is a fundamental way advocated by the church to curb the problem of widowhood. There were many arguments among those who disagreed with the church's stance on the remarriage of widows. The sentiments from the questionnaire were replicated by a participant in the scheduled interview, who reasoned:

I advise the widows to remain faithful in the church, for such practices may ruin their lives. The co-wife herself will not give her peace of mind, but with the young widows who are left without children, it's wise for them to go back to their maternal homes and remarry so that they may not overburden the church. That is the stand of the church. According to 1 Timothy 5:14, Paul advises that the young widows be free and remarry so that they may not overburden the church (Interviewee 9).

But there were those with a different opinion. For instance, a participant in the FGDs maintained: The widow, at first, should accept, adjust, and bear in mind that Christ is the only protector and shield. If she's off-age, she can decide to remain faithful for her entire life, but if she's young, she can remarry through the church procedures (FGD 8).

Participants in the interviews were informed:

Even though the church teaches and emphasises the aspect of remarriage, it cannot be used as a widow support system since not all widows are able to remarry due to other factors like age. Instead, the church encourages them to remain faithful to church doctrine and teach their children to love God and obey His commandments. The attitude of remarriage or remaining faithful to God is not possible (FGD 15).

Another participant in the interviews informed me:

There are numerous orphanages for orphans, but none for widows. If the church advocates only remarriage for widows and does not have the resources to take care of the widows, who will take care of those who have not remarried? The reality of widowhood cannot be handled by mere spiritual exaltations (Interviewee 13).

The findings point out the inconsistencies and selective application of the Biblical message on marriage in cases of the death of one partner without practical structures to ground what it teaches and demands from the membership. The study findings demonstrate many unrealistic expectations of the church for widows while failing to address their actual reality. The complex, multifaceted reality of widowhood calls for diverse and complementary efforts to ensure that widows in the SDA church are well attended to. Given the complexity of the world, it will be wrong to think that solutions facing widows in the church only come from church pronouncements of either remarriage or remaining unmarried.

The field findings showed that remarriage, as advocated by the SDA church, could be more unappealing and unsuitable not just for young widows but also for older women, especially those with children who wish to benefit from the levirate union. Furthermore, the well-being of a widow in terms of identity and belonging continues to be tied to her initial marriage with the deceased husband's home for the children and even herself. Therefore, the idea of remarriage in the biblical tradition is not wholesomely working; in

some cases, especially for young widows, it may work even though not all are able to remarry. Sometimes it is hard to find a partner willing to take up a widow together with the children gotten from the deceased husband. However, on this issue, even the Abagusii community should take cognisance of the fact that even in their midst, in-laws are also becoming less willing to inherit the widows of relatives because of the economic burden of supporting a widow and her family (Okonda, 2017). It is important for the SDA church to understand what widows are going through and support them from that perspective. Failure to do this would only mean adding more pain to their lives (Manala, 2015).

On the construct of condemnation and ex-communication, figure 2 above indicated that none of those answering the questionnaire was in disagreement with the fact that widows who embrace levirate custom undergo condemnation from the church. Only 8 (5.4%) participants were neutral, while the majority of 140 (94.6%) of the respondents were in agreement that the SDA church condemns those widows who are in levirate union relationships. These questionnaire findings were supported by those from the interviews and FGDs, where some of the participants asserted:

We practise levirate custom privately for fear of church condemnation because the church views the practice as an act of polygamy that cannot be accepted in the Christian church that emphasises monogamous marriages through the church procedure where the two must openly wed (FGDs 51).

Whenever a widow is found to have been remarried through a levirate union, she is excommunicated. In this case, many who cannot withstand ex-communication from the church membership opt to practise it secretly. Those who practise it openly are excommunicated from the church, and a good number of them opt to join other denominations that are less rigid, while others decide to be re-baptised and come back to the SDA church membership (Interviewee 7).

But then, this inconsiderate attitude towards widows who opt for levirate unions puts into question the very principles of the Christian message in the parable of the Good Samaritan preached by the SDA church. The Samaritan's attitude and actions to meet the needy person followed the neglect shown by the Levite priests, who are religious and church officials (Luke 10:25–37, Matt 22:34–40, Mark 12:28–34). The rigid stance of the church was seen to frustrate any efforts towards authentic pastoral care of widows, such that for fear, even the friends associated with the widows in levirate relationships opt to avoid widows, leaving them in isolation; they are discriminated against and divorced from the church membership.

The study went further to discuss the theme of the isolation and marginalisation of widows by the SDA church, especially those who engage in levirate marriage. The results in Figure 2 above indicated that none of those who answered the questionnaire disagreed with the thesis that widows who embrace levirate custom experience isolation from the church. Only 8 (5.4%) participants were neutral, while the majority of 140 (94.6%) respondents were in agreement that the SDA church isolates and marginalises those who practise the Abagusii levirate custom.

No, because this practice is considered polygamy, which is not accepted in any Christian church. Those who practise it openly are condemned, isolated, and marginalised from the Christian faith and face

ensorship, while others are excommunicated from the church and denied rendering services in the church (Interviewee 34).

The church excludes and marginalises anyone found engaging in levirate union rather than providing them with church services. This leads to many of them joining other denominations that are less rigid (FGD 15). We are marginalised and isolated in matters of church pastoral ministry and service; every church department is supposed to be allocated three Sabbaths to carry out their programmes from morning to evening, but with us widows, we are allocated minimum services, which is not enough for us to put our energies into service for the church. While those who are in levirate union are not even supposed to perform any function in the church even when they are prepared and willing to offer their services (FGDs 14).

Why should we feel neglected and isolated by the very church we have always esteemed and grown up in? We are not needed simply because we have engaged ourselves in levirate customs that give us support that the church could not holistically give. Because of this, nobody in the church cares about our dignity as humans and people born in faith within the SDA church (FGD 55).

The findings revealed that widows' subordination to the SDA church makes them feel the loss of personal contact and human association, leaving them with the only alternative to withdraw and become unresponsive to the church and its activities. Further, this makes them lose a very important aspect of the church's psychosocial widow support system.

They are left disengaged from social and church interactions and events. This has profound ramifications, such that the SDA church is considered not for "sinners" but rather for the "upright", which in essence, defeats the purpose of being a church. Such widows end up having a very negative appreciation of themselves and the church, with a loss of self-esteem, worth, and dignity; they find it difficult to mingle with other members of the church. They lose friends in the faith who are also suspicious about the "perceived regard" for their marriage option of a levirate union. The field findings are supported by Tembo (2012), who, in her study, found that widows among them were socially isolated because of their status and options in life. The SDA church in Itumbe Station should welcome widows who have embraced any form of life and marriage customs and let them participate in all church activities.

On the theme of the silence of the SDA church on the plight of those who accepted levirate custom, the results in Figure 1 above indicated that none of those who answered the questionnaire disagreed with the thesis that widows who embrace levirate custom experience silence from the church, and none of the participants were neutral. Instead, all 148 respondents (100%) were in agreement that widows who are in levirate unions experience or silence indifference from the church; their issues are never part of the church's concern.

Our reality as widows is not at the forefront of the SDA church; we are not even heard. The life of preaching spiritual issues detached from the reality of the members is what occupies most of the church's

activities. The plight of widows is never at the centre of the church. They are taken as if they never meant anything in the life of the church when they were active members (Interviewee 28).

The situation of silence on the plight of widows noted in the field findings is confirmed by Chauke (2003), who observed that churches in Zimbabwe take a detached stance on the reality of widows who are supposed to take care of the children left to them by their deceased spouses. Bellamy (2005) added that the silence and inaction from the Christian community that surround widowhood for proper care of themselves and their children are morally wrong and unacceptable. While Kretzschmar et al. 2009 sustained that if the church remains silent, then it means she is complicit in acts of injustice, abdicating her responsibility to speak for the helpless and uphold their dignity. The SDA church's stance on widows contradicts the study, which underlines that the most basic way in which the church involves herself in assisting the orphan and widow is by taking up concrete duties for these groups at a local church—organising church-based initiatives like offering shelters, having support groups, home-based care, and encouraging volunteers to get involved in a real and practical way that will alleviate pain and suffering. Such church initiatives cover the basic needs of widows and lessen other forms of widow care that are not consistent with church values. In their absence, the church loses any moral and religious authority to denounce any form of widow care (Levirate and polygamy).

On the postulate of abandonment, the questionnaire field results illustrated in Figure 2 above showed that a majority (almost all) of 140 (94.6%) of the respondents asserted that widows in the church experience abandonment. Only 8 (5.4%) respondents were neutral about the thesis, and none affirmed it. This unanimous response was also confirmed by the qualitative data.

When I lost my husband, I experienced lots of loneliness. I lost friends and people dear to me. This reality replicated itself again when I opted for Levirate due to the loneliness and other responsibilities of caring for the children left to me by my husband. By the fact of this, again, the church pushed me into that spiritual loneliness where, again, as a Christian, I lost a community of believers. The church seems not cognizant of the seriousness of this matter for widows who, despite being in levirate relationships, still want to belong to a spiritual institution (FGDs 46).

The point of the study was that the SDA church abandons its members simply because of some genuine reasons and ends up in levirate unions. This group of women in the study area reported their negative experiences of loneliness and abandonment.

Finally, the study established and discussed the construction of the stigmatisation of widows in the church. The findings in Figure 2 above reveal that all 148 participants (100%) who answered the questionnaire were of the position that widows who engage in levirate marriage are stigmatised by the church membership. This quantitative finding from the questionnaire was confirmed by the qualitative verbatim responses from the interviews and FGDs, as indicated below:

The church is undecided about whether to appoint or elect us widows to leadership or assign us some duties. Whenever there is a chance for any responsibility to be done, the church does it with a lot of

caution because it thinks that in the event that we (widows) are overtaken by desires and remarry or engage in any sexual activity, the church is put in disgrace (FGDs 11).

The findings were in agreement with Onyanha (2003), who argued that it is not only that widows lost their husbands but that the widowhood state of being robs them of their status and condemns them to the brims of society where they suffer life-threatening forms of discrimination, stigma, and deprivation. While the church appears to be in defence of widows by putting protection measures in place to prevent certain practices perceived as unacceptable, the same church isolates them instead of being accommodative. The SDA church should listen to the widows while approaching their issues with an open mind that is devoid of any judgmental nature while providing empathy, confidentiality, and individual-based pastoral care.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions: The study concluded that even though the SDA church, based on the voluntary will of her membership, supports widows, the same widows within the church are subjected to various kinds of suffering and mistreatment. Widows in the church face discriminatory treatment, isolation, poor access to basic services like healthcare, material poverty, psychosocial trauma, demoralisation, fearfulness, emptiness, helplessness, and abandonment to loneliness. This state of affairs raises the need for consistent church support systems that benefit widows. And also, the church should stand by the widows and not be part of their problem. The widows in the SDA church appear to have lost their dignity, which is against the position of Jesus, who showed zero discrimination to any member of society. The church's perception of widows in Itumbe Station must take cognisance of the prevailing socio-economic and religious realities of the widows.

Recommendations: The study recommends the SDA church in Itumbe Station, South Kenya Conference, show compassion towards widows as a manifestation of God's persistent concern for widows and orphans. Undermining widows in the church does not replicate the message of the Holy Scriptures or the mission of the church. However, this does not necessarily mean that the church should provide all the support for the widows in all aspects of their lives.

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