

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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CONSTRUCTING MEANING TO ENHANCE MENTAL WELLNESS FOR CHRISTIAN WIDOWS IN KENYA

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Abstract

Death the unwelcome visitor, leaves in its wake a brew of emotions and milestones to be negotiated. Individuals experience death and its aftermath differently. Widows are vulnerable adults who suffer unfair treatment in many African cultures. As soon as she becomes a widow, a woman's status changes. She loses certain rights and privileges in communities where marriage is viewed as a key to a social class. Widows are expected to partake in rituals and practices that widowers do not. Some of these practices are dehumanizing and psychologically distressing. The rituals and practices are compulsory. Not engaging in them would lead to being ostracized. Remarriage on the other hand is stigmatized, unless it is done within the family as an African woman is married to the clan. The widow, being part of the community understands the meaning of the rituals and practices. She understands what will befall her and her children if she does not accomplish these expectations. Widows live in a community that cannot support them due to the changes that have been caused by contemporary living. Faced with such challenges she a widow has difficult decisions to make. The cultural setup offers little support, she must take responsibility of her mental health. Widows can find solace in the church, among the community of believers. Here one can construct different meanings of death, bereavement, and widowhood using the scripture as a guide rather than the dehumanizing cultural practices related to death and bereavement. The new meaning acts as a gateway to freedom, even as she continues living as a member of the cultural community.

Keywords Widows, Constructing Meaning, and Bereavement.

INTRODUCTION

The inevitability of death is a reality that we do not deal with actively daily. Often we think about death when it knocks on our doors. However, death is a shared human experience, and the process of dying is one that we encounter in daily living. Lake (1998) refers to death as the inevitable finality of life and Kiiru (2014) says that death excites a cocktail of emotions.

My experience with death, dying, and bereavement

is quite intimate resulting from my father's death eight years ago. The "questions and answers on death and dying" have intrigued me since then. Families are left on their own to deal with the loss of their loved one. Individuals have to find their way through grief in the contemporary world. In the African setting, there were structures that provided for and governed grieving and mourning, through the collectivist communities. Many people have moved father away from their families due to

work obligations. The support they would receive in the past is not readily available. However, the need for this support is still within the African person who has a collectivist heritage.

As a clinical psychologist, the experience of my father's death left me awake to the impact of death and the journey of bereavement on mental health; one which those who grieve must travel. In Kenya many people do not have access to therapists and the impact of death and bereavement has been shown to affect health leading to emotional, physical, social, and spiritual problems (Eboh & Boye, 2005; Kathomi et al., 2022). This article presents an argument that the ability to make meaning through actively living the Christian faith in a community can provide a protective role on the mental health. This can be achieved through the meaning that they attach to their experience.

BACKGROUND

With regards to terminal illness, literature shows that men are more likely than women to end a relationship with a partner who has been diagnosed with a terminal illness; referred to as partner abandonment (Glantz et al., 2009). Goldsmith (2009) says that men are six times more likely to separate from or divorce their wives once diagnosed with a terminal illness. In addition, unlike men, women are more likely to stay on in marriage because culture demands so, and since divorce and separation are shunned they would be exposing themselves to stigma. Women are expected to switch fast to caregiving (Mills, 2021) as they are socialized caregivers, and it is seen as their duty to care for ailing family members.

In cases where a husband is diagnosed with a terminal illness a woman's life takes a turn and taking care of her ailing husband becomes a priority. The cultural expectation is that she will care for her husband to the last day (Atobrah & Ampofo, 2016). Consequently, the impact of dying begins to affect a woman's health as soon as her

husband is diagnosed with a terminal illness. Siegel et al. (1996) referred to this as the psychological impact of a foreseeable loss.

Navigating Widowhood within Cultural Expectations

In as much as we all suffer from the loss of loved ones, widows are exposed to greater suffering as culture discriminates against them (Kiiru, 2014). When a husband dies culture dictates govern most of the widow's activities, her conduct, and behavior. According to Sandys (2001), cultures have rules that govern widow's lives, they are subject to religious laws, and patriarchal customs. In addition, they have to deal with discrimination in inheritance rights. For example among the Giriama of the Kenyan coast, a widow is expected to minimize her movements and remain indoors surrounded by other widows. This requirement is observed strictly under the careful watch of older widows. The newly widowed woman is viewed as one who carries the spirit of death and could "infect" those who are married. In this situation, she is unable to access the much-needed support from her friends or family. Support has been shown to buffer against psychological distress, particularly in emotionally charged events (McLean et al., 2022).

According to Eboh and Boye (2005), a widow's health suffers as a result of the stressful experiences brought on by cultural practices. In some communities in the Western part of Kenya, a widow is expected to shave the hair on her head and mourn for a defined length of time. In other communities, they are not allowed to bathe for a certain number of days. Ajiboye (2016) says that unlike widowers, widows in Kenya are put through dehumanizing rituals such as having unprotected sex with the brother of the deceased or his close relative or even a hired village cleanser, to cleanse her from impurities ascribed to her. Failure to engage in these cleansing rituals leads to automatic

ostracism. The psychological impacts of these experiences could include trauma-related psychological distress (Brown et al., 2009). Widows are doomed if they do and doomed if they don't. They are seen as bearers of impurities that can only be cleansed by men through compulsory unprotected sex (UN Women, 2021).

These norms may be not strictly followed among Christians, but the overtures are made by older women to the newly widowed. Widows may be denied certain types of food as a form of rehabilitation (Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Canada, 2002). These may appear as subtle suggestions to help the widow be accepted as part of the community in her new status. Unfortunately, this is additional distress to the grief that the newly widowed woman is experiencing at the time. The many stressors impact psychological resilience and increase susceptibility to mental ill health (Kathomi et al., 2022). A widow has to deal with the loss of her husband, the loss of social status, and still maneuver the need for acceptance in a community that stigmatizes her.

The funeral and burial rites are another set of stressors for widows. Widows have to deal with certain expectations from their community, some distressing practices include observing silence and sitting on the bare floor after burying a husband for extended periods of time. Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Canada (2023) reports a case of a woman who was rescued by her church from the observance of these humiliating and degrading rules. The Christian widow may find these observances demeaning and even harmful, yet she finds herself unable to free herself due to the meaning that she has constructed regarding the backlash or otherwise of lack of observance of these practices. Munala et al. (2022) posit that these rituals stem from how communities comprehend and make meaning of death. The

widow is a part of her community and the meaning of death has a cultural influence on all community members.

Widows suffer from marginalization and loss of social status. In many African settings, marriage is seen as the only route through which women can access economic and social rights (The World Bank, 2017). These rights are lost as soon as a husband dies and remarriage is shunned for widows. A woman is married not just to her husband, but to his family, his clan, and his community. She has no right in the eyes of the community to remarry and those who choose this path are viewed as having loose morals or deviant and are often ostracized. They have to live with the stigma of being remarried. In some African cultures marriage within the family or clan is provided as a solution to widowhood. Wife inheritance gives the woman an opportunity to be "whole" again.

Human rights organizations have worked to raise awareness of the impact of such practices on widows and the psychological impact is evident in research. Akinyi (2023) reported a correlation between widowhood and poor psychological health and Muthangya (2019) reported depressive symptoms among widows in Kenya. Further, Wilcox et al. (2003) report negative effects on mental health and mental health outcomes. Eboh and Boye (2005) propose that African communities engage in practices that nourish and not starve their widows while putting in place programs that eradicate harmful practices that have been shown to affect widows negatively. This would call for encouraging and activating coping strategies to manage the impact of death, dying, and bereavement. Muthangya (2019) proposes that on a personal level, widows can attain and enhance wellness by taking individual responsibility to deal with psychological challenges.

The Church as the New Community

Widows can engage in practices that help enhance their wellbeing. This is gaining more importance as African societies move from the traditional cohesive setups into more individualistic structures. Families no longer live as close knit as they did in the past, which provided cushioning for the widow after the death of a husband. There were clear rituals to be undertaken and obligations to be fulfilled. Presently, families live in different towns and villages as they follow career paths and seek to earn a living. The social fabric is no longer as intact. The widows find themselves getting support from their churches more than their extended families due to proximity. The church members or fellowship groups are found within the locality and they can provide support for the widow.

The church has a special role in the contemporary society to provide the much needed cultural structure to the widows. Scripture gives special treatment to widows and requires the body of Christ to provide for their needs, and give them extra care and honor. A widow can lean on the word of God, the finished work of the cross, and hope in the risen Christ to make difficult decisions during the period of bereavement. According to McGrath (2011), through faith, we see things differently as it illuminates our perceptions, decisions as well as actions: a Christian believer obtains significance for identity, agency, and action. A widow can use the word of God as a lighthouse to guide her to the ultimate destination which is peace in the season of widowhood. One who is a believer can construct meaning to guide her decision-making, based on who God says she is, who he says that he is to her, and what God wants from and for her. She need not be bound to live in fear of what the repercussions of non-observance of practices would be. She can be guided by biblical principles of righteousness and trust in God.

Scripture says that God has a plan for his people, the plan is for good to prosper and not harm them, to provide them hope and a future (New International Version, 2011, Jer 29: 11). Based on this scripture a widow can choose to live her life in the knowledge that the present challenges will pass and that her future is in God's hands. The meaning that she constructs can protect her from the fear of death, being ostracized, stigmatized, and being considered a bad omen, which may propel a widow to obey the cultural practices.

Scripture exhorts believers not to be conformed to the patterns of this world, encouraging them to be transformed by the renewing of the mind (New International Version, 2011, Romans 12: 2). Based on the non-duality of the mind, when renewed it will lead to overall health and freedom from the control of human rules, regulations, and observances (Heylighen & Beigi, 2016). Widows have an opportunity through their faith in Jesus to take responsibility for their mental health by not allowing themselves to be held captive to practices that increase their distress and grief after the loss of their beloved.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I present the challenges that women face as a result of cultural and societal expectations when their husbands are diagnosed with terminal illnesses. I also describe different practices, rituals, and norms that widows are expected and forced to observe during the bereavement period. I propose that the meaning that they apply to the observance or otherwise of such rituals, rites, and practices is what drives them to observe them even when they are detrimental to their mental health. To counter this, I propose that actively living the Christian faith is the panacea for such ills facing the widows in Kenya and in Africa. Widows in Africa have many similarities in observances during bereavement. In addition, the church has become the new community where believers can be supported

during the bereavement period. Widows can be “whole” in the Christian family where they make meaning of their “new” life based on their faith and guided by the gospel.

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