



# Provincial Report

Northern Cape



**COMMISSION ON GENDER EQUALITY**

Gender Equality Ensures a Better Life for All

## **PREFACE**

The CGE's widowhood survey was a nationwide survey of public- and private-sector responses to the plight of widows in the different provinces of South Africa. In order to understand the experiences of widows and widowers, the key issue is to understand the concept of widowhood, as this is influenced by different cultures in different geographical areas and language groups. The study also examined the concepts of human rights in the cultural and religious mourning practices and how these practices impact on both men and women. It is also important to note how participants think they can be helped in trying to address the challenges facing widowhood in the respective provinces.

The research in the Northern Cape Province was coordinated by *Loyiso Mkasi* and *Mercia Appels*.

*In memory of Mercia Appels.*

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## NORTHERN CAPE

### Background of the province

The Northern Cape is the largest province with a surface area of 361 830 square kilometres. However, it is the province with the smallest population. Out of a population of 822 727, 367 774 are male and 454 953 female. A total of 9 414 deaths were recorded in 2000. According to the Northern Cape Growth and Development Strategy, 15,1% of the population had no education, while 71,3% had primary or secondary education in 2001. Only 3,7% had a higher education qualification. According to the 2001 census, 40,8 % were employed, 14,4% unemployed and 44,7% not economically active. The largest employment sector is agriculture at 28,4%. The languages spoken in the province are Tswana, Xhosa, English and Afrikaans.

### Research methodology

#### Sampling

The use of routine sampling procedures would have been impractical as many widows, as well as those who exert an influence on their lives, constitute a hidden population and the parameters of the population are unknown. An attempt was made to obtain as broad and heterogeneous a sample as possible by accessing respondents through various existing channels such as churches, institutions caring for the elderly and networks for widows, widowers and elderly people.

Respondents were selected from the widows and widowers who live in households and institutions of care, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), with caregivers, etc and were drawn from Frances Baard (Kimberley: urban), Kgalagadi (Kuruman: semi-urban) and Pixley Ka Seme (De Aar: rural).



### *Kimberley*

Two successful focus group meetings were attended by representatives of different government institutions, such as the Department of Home Affairs, the Department of Health, the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development (the Office of the Status of Women) and the Department of Social Development (South African Social Security Agency).

NGOs who participated were the Network on Violence against Women (NVAW), the Diocese of Cape Town, the Keimoes and De Aar Rural Development Agency (DOCKDA), the Family and Marriage Association of South Africa (FAMSA) and the Afrikaanse Christen Vroue Vereniging (ACVV). Data obtained from participants and stakeholders was in the form of individual questionnaires, while the focus group session provided additional information.

### *Kuruman*

A second focus group meeting was held in Kuruman with more than 20 participants from different civil society organisations, such as the Gamagara Crisis Centre, the Northern Cape Non-governmental Organisations' Coalition (NCGOCO), the Reatlegile Home-based Care and the Kagisano Women Agricultural Cooperative. The Kagalgadi District Municipality was also represented. Participants shared their different experiences.

### *De Aar*

The third focus group meeting was held in De Aar and was well attended by 37 people. Participants represented different civil society organisations, such as the Community Policing Forum (CPF), Women Against Crime, the Progressive Women's Movement, the Moral Regeneration Movement (MRM), the African National Congress Women's League (ANCWL), the Independent Democrats (ID) and the Masakhane Men's Group. Government departments who participated included the Department of Local Government and Housing, the Department of Social Services and the South African Police Services.



## Data collection instruments

### *Individual questionnaires*

The same questionnaire that was used in all the provinces was used. Researchers had a basic understanding of shortcomings. Some of the questionnaires were completed by telephone, which enabled the fast gathering of information. Participants were willing to participate and completed consent forms.

### *Focus group meetings*

The purpose the focus group meetings was to explore a range of issues from various perspectives. Respondents who participated in the focus groups had experiences in common.

## Findings

### *Issues of commonality*

There was a common understanding that widowhood means the passing away of a life partner. The mourning period is influenced by factors such as culture and religion. Some widows' in-laws demand that they wear black during the mourning period. Widowers, on the other hand, are not subjected to the same scrutiny. Wearing black clothes is also seen to be superstitious, which portrays widows as ascribing to witchcraft. Widowers are not as stigmatised as widows are.

### *General stereotypes*

The wearing of mourning clothes isolates widows from the community at large. Widows are not supposed to socialise or be seen in public. This stereotype is not applied to widowers. In fact, they are often encouraged to start visiting prospective wives or partners. Society/family still views widows as being married.

### *Issues that make widows vulnerable*

Widowers are not made to feel vulnerable by cultural practices. They enjoy freedom and life continues as normal. Widows are made to sit on a mattress after their husbands have passed away, making them more dependent, and





ensuring that the in-laws are in total control. They can end up losing their money or their assets. Culture plays a negative role in making widows more vulnerable. Some widows never get the opportunity to take charge again, and their powers are taken away from them.

Men in the rural areas who perform migrant labour were mentioned in the Kgalagadi area. This makes widows vulnerable, not only socio-economically, but it also exposes them to the dangers of contracting HIV/AIDS. Widows seldom knew where their husbands had been employed or who to contact to claim pension benefits. Widows would normally suffer loss of livestock and land while in the mourning process. Due to cultural practices, some widows are expected to marry the closest male relative from the husband's family. In the Zulu culture, it is common practice for a widow to marry the brother of her late husband. This practice makes women vulnerable to contracting STIs and HIV/AIDS.

#### *The benefits of widowhood*

Generally, widowhood has no benefits for the widow or widower. However, widows who were in abusive relationships are relieved when a partner dies. They look forward to the pension benefits to stabilise the socio-economic circumstances of the family.

#### *The origin of these rules/customs/practices*

Wearing black is generally seen in all cultures. However, the mourning process differs from culture to culture and from religion to religion. These practices are passed on from generation to generation and are not documented. In addition, people learn these practices from society.

There was an impression that the ancestors made these rules to have total ownership of a woman after lobola had been paid. Most of the widows and widowers felt that these customs and practices are not relevant to modern living environments.

#### *The customs/traditions to which widows/widowers adhere*

A widow is expected to look after her husband until he passes away. Instead of a widow taking care of the funeral arrangements, the elderly and other family members make the decisions. A widow must wear black during the funeral ceremony and sometimes for three months afterwards. After a three-to six-month mourning period, the in-laws must buy the widow new clothes

to 'cleanse' her after the death of her partner. A widower does not need to stop his activities and does not have to wear black during the funeral or the mourning process.

*Who has the power/control/authority over the widow?*

Power is wielded by the in-laws. Sometimes, children also want control over their remaining parent. Society can also be controlling in the sense that widows are not allowed to do certain things. Culture and tradition can also have power over widows. Church and religious beliefs also wield power over the widow, but not necessarily over the widower.

Interviews were conducted with the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development, the Department of Home Affairs, the Department of Health and the Department of Social Development (the South African Social Security Agency).

A common observation is that there are no specific services or programmes directed at widows and widowers at any of the departments. No statistics were available about contact with widows or widowers. Departments usually interact with widows or widowers during the initial stages of their loss, with activities such as registering the death and the estate, handling applications for a Child Support Grant, and transferring property to the living partner.

## Conclusion

The researcher noted that the experiences from people in the urban areas are not the same as those in the rural areas. People from rural areas are more driven by tribalism and are still confined to cultural and ritual beliefs. Widows and widowers from urban areas are more liberal. They believe that culture is dynamic, without generalising. However, stereotyping seems to perpetuate the vulnerability of widows.

There are many issues that make widows vulnerable. In the Xhosa and Zulu cultures, the in-laws could demand their lobola back. Some churches, for example the Pentecostal Church, do not recognise the mourning period. Most widows feel that culture and religion are more hostile to them than to widowers, and that they are more suppressed.





On the other hand, death can be a relief to widows who were in abusive relationships or marriages. It is an opportunity for widows to rediscover who they are and what their purpose is. Some got married at a young age. Now they can study further and pursue their dreams. Most widows neglected themselves during marriage. Widows and widowers say no-one should control them or have power over them.

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations emanated from the research:

- Widows and widowers should assert their democratic rights and receive the requisite support from their families and the community.
- Awareness should be raised in communities about the positive and negative impact of mourning on widows and widowers, not forgetting their children.
- Appropriate education and training material that is gender-sensitive should be developed to ensure a change in the mindset of all relevant institutions that deal with widowhood and relevant issues.
- Social networks and gender-awareness should be strengthened and service providers informed.
- Legislation and policy frameworks should be reviewed to consolidate gains made, and to identify impacts on the lives of widows and their children.
- Widows and widowers should be treated equally before the law and the human rights of all should be non-transferable.
- There is an urgent need to mainstream a widow perspective in all policy developments.
- Government should employ all measures possible to eliminate discrimination, and work with widow groups to assess their numbers and situations, so as to develop policies and laws to alleviate their isolation and poverty, and acknowledge their valuable social capital.