

Provincial Report

Northwest



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.

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NORTH-WEST

Background of the province

About 3,5 million people reside in the North-West, a province with a surface area of some 116 320 km². The province's human resource development levels are low, with 22,7% of adults never having received any formal education. The largest economic sector in the province is mining – which traditionally excluded women from participation and financial gain. Agriculture comprises 3% of the province's economy. This explains the consistently higher degree of unemployment among women, in comparison to men. The province is predominantly rural, with 65,1% living in rural areas. However, the rate of urbanisation is increasing, largely due to the lack of employment opportunities in rural areas.

Research methodology

Despite the problems faced by widows and widowers in the North-West, many of them strongly felt that the quality of life has improved. The safety and protection of widows remains the main challenge facing this province. Cultural and traditional practices cannot be clearly defined and their origin is not known. This has resulted in young widows feeling that these kinds of practices need to be abolished.

Data collection process

This study applied both qualitative and quantitative methods of research, with the main aim of improving on the quality of data and reliability of the research results. The type of data used was primary data obtained through quantitative questionnaires and qualitative methods (focus group interviews) to capture the experiences of widows and widowers in the North-West. The data collection process was designed so that it would best cover different areas and racial groups in the province.



Table 1: Focus group interviews

Research site	Category	Race	No of participants	
			Female	Male
Miga Village	Rural	Black	9	-
Pudumoeng Village	Rural	Black	12	7
Klerksdorp	Semi-urban	Black Coloured	8	-
Rustenburg	Rural	Black	9	2
Mafikeng Old Age Home	Urban	White	9	-
Lapalabolthe Old Age Home	Rural	Black	6	1
TOTAL			53	10

Table 2: Sampling

Research site	Category	Race	District municipality	No of focus group interviews
Mafikeng Old Age Home	Urban	White	Central	1
Lapalabolthe Old Age Home	Rural	Black	Central	1
	Semi-urban	Black	Southern	1
Klerksdorp	urban	Coloured	Bojanala	1
Rustenburg	Rural	Black		

The following public-sector stakeholders participated in the stakeholder interviews:

- Department of Social Development
- Department of Education
- Department of Local Government and Housing
- Master of the High Court
- Central District Municipality

In this study, both quantitative and qualitative data was dominated by widows, which could result in bias, as the research results may only raise the concerns of widows. Gaining access to stakeholders in the private sector was also a great challenge for the researcher and this study does not clearly reflect the role played by the private sector in assisting widows and widowers, or the effectiveness of the systems.

Focus group discussions were transcribed and, where necessary, translated. For each focus group, transcription was done to identify and produce a descriptive framework consisting of particular themes that were in line with the draft paper or that best describe the social relations approach. It was

based on a comparative analysis where similarities and differences were identified. The main issues in the responses of the widowers and widows emerged and key target areas were identified for possible solution.

Findings

Widowhood as a social institution

Widowhood is usually interpreted as the social role assumed on the death of a married partner and at the dissolution of the marriage by death. The social role prescription is closely associated with the mourning of a late husband or wife. Obviously, one does not have to be legally married to mourn the death of a partner, but marriage provides an institutional framework for coping with the loss. However, in the absence of a registered and recognised marriage, widowhood status and the associated mourning process is questioned and often becomes the source of family disputes.

The main values of a culture are passed on through its symbols. The symbolic meaning of wearing the prescribed attire during the mourning period and the distinct prescriptions regulating a woman's behaviour and mobility in this time are powerful ways of reinforcing cultural values regarding life, death and the after-life, and reinforcing the patriarchal value system. The widowhood period should ideally be a time when a widow can come to terms with her loss and reconstruct her life – both financially and socially.

Mourning rituals should ideally play a key role in this period of transition. However, a typical feature of values is the contradiction of its positive and negative qualities.

Sanctioning of widowhood rites

Many of these strongly held norms can be considered as mores, as they are considered essential and are strictly enforced. For many women, adherence to informal norms regarding mourning rituals is an attempt to avoid social sanctions as exercised by their families, in-laws and church and community members. A fine line exists between supporting a widow in her time of need, and imposing on her and exploiting her.

Vulnerability in widowhood

The practice of a widow's male relatives or in-laws controlling funeral arrangements and determining the terms and conditions of the mourning process was found to be widespread. Restrictions imposed on widows by far exceeded prescriptions for male behaviour after the death of a spouse.





Widowhood is often a time when old and new family conflicts are contested. It also provides opportunities for fraudulent and unethical – if not immoral – behaviour, harassment and hate speech. Stigmatisation, victimisation, prejudice and discrimination conflate during widowhood. This has been noted at various levels and in various social structures.

The Batho Pele initiative aims to enhance the quality and accessibility of government services by improving efficiency and accountability to the recipients of public goods and services. However, according to some of the respondents, this does not seem to be the case. This clearly shows the lack of confidence and trust in public servants. The long time the public sector takes to process requests from the general public is normally caused by a lack of policies (in the case of widows and widowers) in government departments and in local government.

Responses from provincial government officials

The responses of the government department officials questioned on the issue of service delivery and the protection of widows and widowers clearly showed that there is no programme or policy in place in any government department to assist or protect widows and widowers.

There is no resource capacity in local municipalities to deal with gender issues and, as a result, it is very difficult to develop programmes and policies that will assist and protect widows and widowers. Government officials also face real obstacles in rendering appropriate and effective services to widows and widowers, due to a lack of knowledge and understanding of the justice system amongst widows and widowers. This contributes significantly to their abuse. This was noted by the Master of the High Court.

The role of civil society support structures

While evidence of discrimination abounds, many individuals have organised themselves to provide effective support to widows, especially where existing services are lacking. The slogan “matlo go sha mabapi” is often used, which simply implies that if one’s neighbour is affected one is also affected; and as the community one shares problems and challenges. This is quite common in the BaTswana tribe, where the community plays a critical role in the funeral arrangements.

Some widows in Klerksdorp mentioned that they always report their problems to the Widows' Forum and that their problems will be attended to by officials of the forum. The forum also serves as a counselling centre for victims of abuse during widowhood.

Recommendations

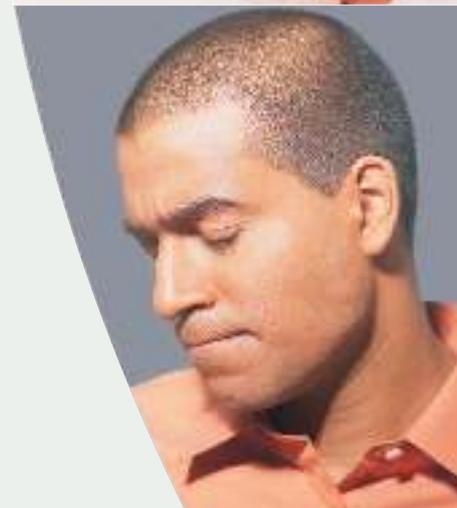
Although widows experience many problems, they are not necessarily passive victims. They employ strategies to deal with their situation and to overcome problems. Reporting cases to the police has always been one of the strategies used by widows to overcome circumstances with which they are faced during the mourning and widowhood period.

In general, educated widows seem to have been better able to cope than their counterparts, who have little or no education. It could be argued on the basis of this that education, as a tool for knowledge, opens up avenues and options for bettering one's life. Widows who were educated have more options to resort to in the solution of their problems relating to widowhood.

The economically strong widow is also more likely to succeed in retaining some of her property than her less fortunate counterpart. While an older widow is less likely to be harassed and/or dispossessed than a younger one, the latter, in her part, has more energy physically and emotionally to do everything necessary to 'pick up the pieces and start all over again' and survive.

Generally, it is clear that there is less support for widows to gain access to land or to inherit the land and property of their husbands from traditional authorities and the community at large. Eviction from properties may result in the infringement of a widow's rights to shelter and also of those of children to shelter and proper care. This kind of system and social setting has many social and economic implications, not only for the widow, but also for her minor dependant children.

One of the most serious challenges faced by South Africa in its quest to provide adequate social protection is the ability of our elders – and widows in particular – to access property and land. It is evident that many widows in our country are denied the opportunity to inherit land. Lack of education and an understanding of our legal system remains a great challenge for our democracy. From the data presented above, it is clear that women in rural areas and townships lack a clear understanding of the legal system, including their rights if married under customary or civil marriage law. As a result, some end up losing their properties and belongings.





Cultural norms continue to ascribe minor status to women, which disqualifies them from owning property. As a result, women find themselves at the mercy of whoever is nominated to administer the estate. This is usually the deceased's first son or male relative who will, in most cases, use the property for his own ends to the disadvantage of the widow. Although the level of unemployment is very high among women in the North-West, widows, in particular, are economically vulnerable and have to resort to income-saving and income-generating activities to cope with the demands and hardships with which they are faced.

This research study identified a number of challenges faced by widows and widowers, which should be deliberated by key role-players in the province, including provincial government departments, the private sector and statutory bodies. These deliberations are as follows:

- An interpretation of the notion of gender equality, which may lead to some men resisting changes to promote women in society.
- Mourning practices that are used to oppress women and that deny them the opportunity to grieve in the manner they prefer.
- Reconciling mourning practices of women and men with workplace policies and the requirements of fair labour practice.
- Promoting an understanding of the legal consequences of marriage, cohabitation and the death of a spouse or partner, especially among illiterate and rural women.
- Legal recourse for widows to ensure their rightful access to and control over property and belongings upon the death of a spouse.
- Integrating a focus on widowhood in the service delivery programmes of government departments.

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