

Provincial Report

Western 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 following people are acknowledged for their role in the research project *Winnie Mofokeng, Mashudu Nefhere and Tasneem du Pont*.

Contact Details of The Western Cape Provincial office of The Commission on Gender Equality.

Western Cape Province

132 Adderley Street, 5th Floor, Absa Building, Cape Town, 8001

P.O. Box 1774, Cape Town 8000

Tel: +27 21 426 4080/3

Fax: +27 21 424 0549

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Background of the province

The population census for 2001 estimated the total population of the Western Cape to be 4,5 million, with the female population constituting 51.5% and the male population 45.5%. The main employment sectors are mining, construction, manufacturing, transport, agricultural fishery, building and trade. The majority of women are employed in the community's social and personal services industries. Women are more likely than men to be in the lower earning category. According to the census, there were 30 956 widowers and 138 819 widows in this province in 2001.

Research methodology

Sampling

This is both a qualitative and quantitative study aimed at exploring and describing the experiences of the widows and widowers in the province. The study was conducted in the Xhosa and Coloured communities in three diverse district municipalities: Khayelitsha (peri-urban/informal settlement), Retreat (urban) and Bredasdorp (rural area). These were purposely sampled to suit the study on the basis of their heterogeneous characteristics. The Grandmothers Against Poverty and AIDS (GAPA) Association assisted with the identification of respondents for this study. This organisation deals with the care of the elderly, as well as widows and widowers. The study further consulted the Cape Flats Development Association (CFDA), which provides numerous services to disadvantaged communities on the Cape Flats.

Data collection process

Individual structured questionnaires

To collect data, 120 individual structured questionnaires were distributed to widows and widowers with the help of care givers from the three areas. Snowball sampling was employed to gather data from widows and widowers due to the absence of an established database.



Table 1: Sampling

Research sites	Category	Race	No of respondents
Khayelitsha	Peri-urban	Black	12
Bredasdorp	Rural	Coloured	24
Retreat	Urban	Coloured	64
Retreat	Urban	White	13
Retreat	Urban	Indian	7

Stakeholders' questionnaires

Sets of guidelines were used for the stakeholders, which comprised the Department of Home Affairs, the Department of Health and Local Government, the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development (the Masters of the High Court) and the Department of Social Development (the South African Social Security Agency)(SASSA). SASSA and the local government e-mailed their responses, while the Master's Office was interviewed telephonically. The Department of Home Affairs and the Department of Health were not available to respond to the questionnaires during the data collection phase.

Focus group interviews

Focus group interviews were conducted in each of the three identified areas. Widows and widowers were asked to complete a structured questionnaire. The number of respondents in each focus group session differed from one location to another.

Table 2: Focus group interviews

Research sites	Category	No of stakeholder respondents			No of respondents/ participants	
		NGO	CBO	Unions	Female	Male
Khayelitsha	Peri-urban	1	0	0	8	1
Bredasdorp	Rural	1	3	0	4	3
Retreat	Urban	2	1	1	7	1

Findings

Data analysis issues should be carefully considered, as its aim is to transform information (data) into an answer to the original research question. The researcher transcribed the recorded data and then analysed it. Major themes were categorised. The researcher was able to logically account for stages in the data analysis and a final conclusion was reached based on the generated data.

A widow's behaviour is regulated by a strict normative framework that is anticipated by the community and the families. A faith-based organisation (FBO) states that it is imperative to consider the different background and the different cultural practices. The community sees widowhood in a particular way. People seldom want to be associated with it, or to accept widows or widowers. They are often isolated and ostracised, not only by the community, but also by the different stakeholders. In most cases, widows and widowers are not informed of their rights, which results in disempowerment that repeatedly marginalises them. Community expectations violate the rights of widows and widowers. They are not expected to find another partner and are under strict surveillance.

Traditional and cultural practices during widowhood

In this study, many widows, especially Africans, were not against tradition per se, but such practices have been made normative. They do not seem to realise that some of these practices bind them and marginalise and subjugate them. Cultural practices prevent African women from expressing their views. Decisions are made on their behalf. The voices of African widows are still silenced. Some of these traditional practices perpetuate injustices to the majority of African women. Tradition seems to have played a negative role in perpetuating women's vulnerabilities. Cultural practices change, but in most cases, widows still face discrimination. There are still imbalances in the way widows are treated.

Access to inheritance

Widowers are more privileged than widows during widowhood. Widowers maintain the same position in as far as access to land and property rights are concerned. This reinforces the societal hierarchies wherein widows and their children, in particular, are oppressed. Some widows do not have access to the deceased's estate or any form of inheritance.





Elderly people and the widowhood process

Some resort to remarriage as a solution to the problems of loneliness, poverty and low status. Remarriage is perceived differently in the three areas. In Retreat, one widow felt that she had made a big mistake when she remarried, while a widow in Bredasdorp associated remarriage with morality. In Khayelitsha, it is associated with the decision-making powers of the in-laws. Remarriage has implications on property rights. Some widows experience abuse, while others are threatened by their new partners. Remarriage also impacts differently on children. Some widows constantly have to choose between their spouse and their children from the previous marriage. Some widows fear that their children will fuel misunderstanding when they remarry. Others are challenged by the fact that their children are not interested in having another father. There are issues of jealousy and widows have to make sacrifices for the sake of their children. For some widows, remarrying is not ideal, because they are still attached to their deceased spouse.

The faith-based organisations (FBOs) support widows and widowers. Even though some societal structures such as the FBOs promote remarriage for young widows and widowers, it is still their responsibility to prepare them emotionally and spiritually for the challenges of remarriage.

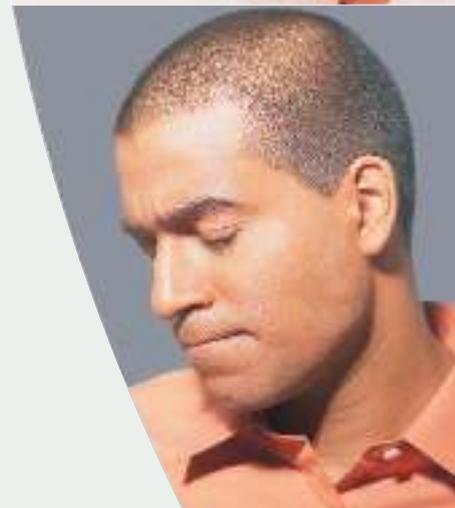
Interpretation of findings

The concept of loneliness emerged from all the focus groups. Loneliness might also be perpetuated by society's high expectations that widows and widowers should behave appropriately. In most cases, a widow's behaviour is monitored to a greater extent than that of a widower's. Support is available in various forms. However, the degree to which this vulnerable group is aware of it is still questionable. Most widows constantly referred to the church and to God as their support basis. Many widows shift the focus of their attention to religion, transforming themselves from a devoted wife into a devout believer.

Stakeholders' responses

Various stakeholders, who were identified on the basis that they might be rendering a service to widows and widowers, were approached.

- *South African Social Security Agency (SASSA):* SASSA in the Western Cape consists of a regional office and 16 local offices. It conducts door-to-door campaigns in the communities to inform inhabitants about their rights regarding social grants and to assess problems related to these grants. At community imbizos, the public is informed about the qualifying requirements for social grants. Information is also disseminated through the distribution of pamphlets and adverts in newspapers. The Social Assistance Act does not provide for a specific grant for widows/widowers per se. They are, however, eligible to receive other grants, such as an Old Age Pension, Disability Grant, Child Support Grant or Social Relief Grant, if they qualify.
- *The Master's Office:* The Master's Office assists with inheritance issues. If a person died without a will (intestate), the closest legal relative inherits. An executor is appointed if one was not nominated. It became evident that people are not well informed about estates and squabbles often ensue between family members about inheritance. The Master sometimes has to intervene when wills were drawn up without legal consultation. Cohabitation also gives rise to inheritance issues. In cases where there is conflict in partnerships that evolve from cohabitation, the matter is referred to the High Court. The Master's Office looks at all aspects. The children of the deceased receive a grant based on the income level of the deceased, which is paid to the Guardian's Fund until the children reach the age of 21. They have to apply for money that is needed for clothes and school, for example.
- *Local Government:* One district manager responsible for social development projects indicated that to ensure that information is disseminated, there is constant liaison with stakeholders and interest groups. There are special programmes for the vulnerable in the community, including seniors and the disabled. Local government acknowledges the plight of widows by acknowledging that they are a vulnerable group as most of them start to learn to deal with their issues when the partner dies. They should be eligible for grants as most have no skills to allow them to be gainfully employed. Where there is a possibility for skills development, they should be invited to participate.





Recommendations

This study is an attempt to highlight some of the challenges that widows and widowers experience. They are still marginalised by their in-laws and their own children, who sometimes demand an inheritance forcefully. They do not understand their rights and they lack information with regard to their rights to inheritance as it is entrenched in the law of succession. Traditional and cultural practices and stereotyping still entrench widows' subordination. Widows and widowers experience different challenges, and widows are comparably still the most vulnerable category of persons in society. Widows are marginalised by traditional and cultural practices. There are differences in the manner in which societies respond to widowhood, and in the challenges they face.