



## Article

# Isolation and Its Impact on Widows: Insights from Low-Resourced Communities in Binga District, Zimbabwe

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**Abstract:** The lives of women change immediately after the death of their husbands. After the death of their husbands, they experience extraordinary isolation which excludes them from important socioeconomic decisions. This paper discusses how widows are isolated and excluded in pertinent socioeconomic spheres and decisions that impact negatively on their lives including the lives of their children in low resourced communities of Binga District in Zimbabwe. Twenty-four widows were participants in this study, which used a qualitative research approach, a phenomenological research design and purposive sampling strategy. Ten widows participated in individual interviews whilst fourteen widows participated in two separate focus group interviews comprising seven widows each to provide insights on how they were isolated after the death of their husbands. Germain to isolation, thematic data analysis findings revealed that, upon the death of their husbands, widows are vulnerable to exclusion from critical decisions on accrued wealth, socioeconomic amenities and activities needed for their optimal well-being and the welfare of their children. The findings show the need for negotiated professional and community social interventions that are organised and integrated.

**Keywords:** isolation; widows; socioeconomic impact; well-being; negotiated interventions



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## 1. Introduction

Widowhood is a global concern with no culture, ethnic and racial group, or religion immune to the phenomenon. Literature has proven that the population of widows can be described to have reached epidemic levels globally with future projections expected to rise ([The Loomba Foundation 2015](#)). As an example, the global proportion population of widows was around 16% in 2009 and has lately increased by 9.0%, ([The Loomba Foundation 2015](#)), due to wars in Afghanistan, Syria, the Democratic Republic of Congo and recently in Ukraine ([Batha 2022](#)). In industrialised countries, widowhood is usually experienced by older women over 60-years old, however in African countries, such as Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, and Zimbabwe, the number of young widows has increased from “15-years of age” onwards ([Djuikom and van de Walle 2018](#); [Van de Walle 2016](#)).

Whilst protection measures across the world could have been put in place to prevent overt harmful practices on widows through various structural forms, the isolation of widows remains prevalent, proves difficult to control and is protractedly endemic ([Houston et al. 2016](#); [Mohindra et al. 2012](#)). The isolation of widows comes in different forms. Much of the researched form of isolation for widows include social isolation where the widow is left disengaged in social interactions and village events due to stigma associated with the spirit of the dead be it in her natal family and friends or community members. This remains in place until rituals are performed to purify her from associated evil spirits of the dead ([Houston et al. 2016](#); [Manala 2015](#)). This form of isolation has been condemned for causing ill-mental health and psychological disorders in widows ([Peña-Longobardo et al. 2021](#); [Sekgobela et al. 2020](#)). During this time, crucial decisions are made regarding the widow and her children with the widow deliberately excluded

from such decisions resulting in systematic disenfranchising, marginalisation confusion, and powerlessness (Sulumba-Kapuma 2018).

Research has further established other forms of isolation that include depriving the widow of accrued wealth and socioeconomic amenities such as property and land which the widow owned with the late husband (Korang-Okrah et al. 2019; Ndabarushimana and Dushime 2018). Isolation of the widow from accessing socioeconomic resources, property and accrued wealth drastically reduces the economic base and means of sustenance needed for the widows and their children's well-being and welfare. In rural and low-resourced communities, widows are forced destitute welfare cases (Dube 2016).

Despite the growing body of research on widowhood, a gap still exists on the impact of various forms of isolation on widows in low-resourced communities where research is scanty, and interventions are limited. Scientific research is argued to be more important in low and poor-resourced communities to provide novel solutions than in rich areas with a lot of resources (Themane 2019; Yapa and Bärnighausen 2018). Based on low-resourced communities, this study closes the identified and lamentable research gap and remains crucial as it adopts a phenomenological research design, (Padgett 2017), to reveal widows' personal experiences of isolation and its impact on their lives.

The research questions that gave impetus to conduct this study were firstly, how do widows experience isolation in the Binga District of Zimbabwe? The second research question was how do various forms of isolation impact the lives of widows upon the death of their husbands? These research questions would only be answered through scientific social research; hence this study was conducted. To address the research questions, specific objectives were set. These objectives were to describe the experiences of isolation among widows in Binga District in Zimbabwe and determine the impact of isolation of the lives of the widows. The findings of the study confirm that widows were impacted negatively when isolated upon the death of their husbands with various detrimental socioeconomic injustices experienced (DuBois and Miley 2014).

### *1.1. The Impact of Widowhood in Low-Resourced Communities*

There are various ways in which low-resourced communities experience widowhood. As a point of departure, it is critical to describe low-resourced communities. Themane (2019) describes low-resourced communities as those that have frequent recurring problems without solutions to address the problems they experience. Using the scoping review method of literature review, Van Zyl et al. (2021) described low-resourced communities as characterised by underdeveloped infrastructure, having financial problems, with a population lacking functional education, restricted social resources with closed cultural beliefs that influence distinct behaviour.

In low-resourced communities, studies have found that widowhood is associated with various health, psychosocial and socioeconomic risks (Djuikom and van de Walle 2018; Li and Lin 2019; Sekgobela et al. 2020). Widows in low-resourced communities are immersed in the associated health issues. Many of the widows in low-resourced African communities, especially Sub-Saharan Africa are affected by the Human-Immunodeficiency Virus and the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (HIV and AIDS) whilst health resources in these communities are generally poor and substandard (Dube 2021). The costs of maintaining good health are high and unaffordable for most widows.

The vulnerability of widows to psychological problems in low-resourced communities cannot be overemphasised. Stress and depressive symptoms associated with widowhood has increased the need for psychological support in low-resourced communities, yet such support is meagre. This had been bemoaned for reducing coping options for widows and triggering elongated anxiety and complicated grief (Dabergott 2021; Witting et al. 2020).

Social problems are also synonymous with widowhood. There is an inevitable loss of meaningful social relations once a woman is widowed in low-resourced communities. Widowhood stigma increases risk of losing friends and companionship with important members of the community of residence (The London School of Economic and Political

Sciences 2021). As widows lose their husbands, the likelihood of isolation rises as they also lose other important members of their social networks, including childhood friends, and suffer increased notable acrimony with their late husband's family (Van de Walle 2016). Widows generally become upset about losing human touch and engagement.

Widowed women in under-resourced communities experience more economic threats than other groups of women. Most women in underdeveloped and low-resourced areas depend on their husbands for financial support, and when their husbands pass away, a new chapter of enduring financial dangers and inadequate safety nets begins (Djuikom and van de Walle 2018). Economic distribution in patriarchal countries favours the accumulation of wealth in the hands of men (Hsiao et al. 2021). In most cases, women in low-resourced communities find themselves totally dependent on men to meet their financial demands, rendering them more vulnerable to financial losses if their spouses die. Research also provides evidence of property, economic and financial losses by widows through disinheritance by in-laws, where written wills and legal intervention prove inadequate to protect them (Sulumba-Kapuma 2018; Tembo 2012; The Loomba Foundation 2015).

### 1.2. The Study Context

Geographically, Binga District is situated in Matabeleland North Province in the North-West of Zimbabwe. Binga District is a rural and low-resourced community with unique demographic and sociocultural circumstances. The district has the greatest population in the province and is primarily home to members of the BaTonga tribe. Male mortality rates are greater than female mortality rates (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency 2012). In the Matabeleland North Province, 15% of the total population are widows with 8.3 percent living in the Binga District, while the remaining 7% is shared among the other eight districts in the province (Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency 2012). The proportion of widows in Binga District is comparably higher than any other district in the province. Few individuals have access to formal education, especially women of all ages, which has an impact on women's social status and wellbeing (Dube 2016). The BaTonga people in the district have a deep commitment to their sociocultural practices and are resistant to cultural change which they vehemently condemn as having foreign influence.

Extended families, which are a common social phenomenon in the district, subject widows to cultural cleansing upon the death of their husbands and exclude them from critical decision-making processes. Even in the face of the HIV and AIDS pandemic, levirate marriages, which involve inheriting a widow by a husband's relative, and polygamy are still widespread customs in the district. Due to the male-dominated social structure in the district, traditionally arranged marriages are typical, with women in the family frequently playing secondary roles and being seen as a subordinate population (Dube 2016). Similar to other contexts such as Nepal, India, Nigeria, Ghana and Malawi, the subordinate position of widows in the Binga District of Zimbabwe makes them vulnerable to oppression, powerlessness, abuse, and isolation without sound recourse and redress (Ajayi et al. 2019; Korang-Okrah et al. 2019; Mohindra et al. 2012; Sulumba-Kapuma 2018). Child customary marriages are also a typical social phenomenon with 30% of girls under the age of 18 reportedly having been recorded as maternity ward cases (Muntanga and Muzingili 2019). This aids in explaining why there has been a rise in young widows in the Binga District.

## 2. Theoretical Frameworks

Understanding the difficulties widows face from the various theoretical angles that try to explain their circumstances is necessary. This study uses radical feminist and ecological systems theories to provide an abstraction of widows' experiences following their husbands' death. These theoretical stances have been applied to conceptualise the root causes of the issues that widows face in Binga District.

The use of feminist theories is justified in explaining the predicament of widows in a patriarchal society, such as the Binga District, which feminist theorists decry for

its continuous oppression of women. According to radical feminist theory, women are the most powerless and oppressed population group and the oppression they suffer is pervasive, crosses all racial, cultural, and economic groups, and causes the greatest amount of suffering (Fauzia 2019; Teater 2014). Radical feminist theorists contend that men in patriarchal communities control the social structures and conventions that are used to control women. They argue that such structures and norms should be dismantled for the advancement of women (Graff 2012; Lewis 2020). This study used radical feminism's relevance in describing the isolation, unfair and unjust treatment experiences of widows in Binga District which deserves condemnation.

From a different perspective, the role of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory in this investigation is essential. The critical point of departure in this theory is to analyse people's interactions within experiences in an environment called person-in-environment (Mbedzi 2019). The theory asserts that there are continual transactions between people and their environment in which they live with valued cultures observed by individuals, groups and communities that determines either positive or negative outcomes in the transactions involved (Mbedzi 2019). Whilst transactions happen between people and their environment, entropy happens where death takes place in the system which is what widows experience. This entropy or death causes disorganisation of the system which leads to problems that are especially felt by widows and their orphaned children as they struggle to cope with the changes (Mbedzi 2019).

This study adopted a qualitative research approach and a phenomenological research design to obtain first-hand experiences of isolation among widows after the death of their husbands in the Binga District in Zimbabwe. This allowed the researcher to gain insight on their experiences and document rich descriptions on how the widows are impacted by their isolation (Braun and Clarke 2013).

### *2.1. Population and Sampling*

The study used a non-probability homogenous purposive sampling technique from the population of widows in the Binga District, in which participants were chosen based on their experience of widowhood residing in low-resourced areas. This was the eligibility and inclusion criteria used to choose the widows who would take part in the research (Denscombe 2014; Gray 2014; Padgett 2017). Widows who were not emotionally ready to share their experiences were excluded from participating in the study.

To ensure better representation, the widows who participated in the study were chosen from either Binga North (BN), a peri-urban area, or Binga South (BS), a predominantly rural area. Ten widows took part in individual in-depth interviews, and 14 widows took part in two separate focus group interviews. This was done to ensure that widows from both Binga North and Binga South took part in the study. The widows were chosen at random to participate in one of two types of interviews: individual or focus group. Using two data gathering methods ensured that data that might have been missed by one method is captured in another method to increase the level of trustworthiness of the findings (Gray 2014).

### *2.2. Data Collection Methods*

The researcher collected data by himself. An independent person assisted the researcher with obtaining consent from the participants. The collection process comprised two phases. In the first phase of the study, data were collected in December 2016 through one-on-one interviews with the widows (Stinger 2014). The study's second phase included focus group interviews, with each group consisting of seven (7) widows, with data obtained in January 2017. The advantage of using focus group interviews in this study was that they allowed the researcher to collect data that would have been missed in the first phase of the study where one-on-one interviews with the widows was used to collect data. Therefore, this study used two separate interview schedules to collect data.

The interview schedules were semi-structured and were translated into chiTonga language which is the language spoken in the Binga District. The English version of the interview schedule was translated by the language news anchor at the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) which is a public broadcaster in Zimbabwe. The reverse translation was undertaken by the education officer at the District Ministry of Education office in the same district. The individual interviews were done in the safe spaces in the home of the participants so that the participants could be in control of their own environments. The focus group interviews were done at the two nearest schools for both the Binga North (BN) and Binga South (BS) participants of the focus groups. Schools provided safer spaces and rooms for conducting the focus group interviews. Prior permission was sought from school committees of the two schools where the focus group interviews were conducted.

[Bryanard et al. \(2014\)](#) have opined that research ethics comprises the researcher's understanding of what constitutes "good or improper" conduct on their part, which subsequently serves as criteria for judging study conduct. As a result, the researcher obtained ethical authorisation from the North-West University's Higher Degrees Committee (Ethics number: NWU-004S91-11S-491), gained access from the gatekeepers, and obtained informed consent from the widows who were participants in the study in accordance with research ethics. The researcher kept the information obtained during the study private and confidential. The participants' shared information was password-protected on a computer and on Google Drive for privacy and confidentiality. Instead of using the participants' real names, pseudonyms were used to ensure anonymity.

### 2.3. Data Analysis

The initial process in data analysis was to group the responses according to the questions asked in the study for all the participants. The responses formed the data extracts which were later analysed for patterns in the responses of the participants to extracts categories. To organise and explain the analysed data in this study, various categories that were constructed were based on themes and emergent concerns in this study. Familiarization with the data, producing initial codes, finding themes, examining the topics, defining, and labelling the themes, and lastly preparing the study report were the six categories that the data analysis process followed ([Maguire and Delahunt 2017](#); [Braun and Clarke 2013](#)). The researcher transcribed the verbatim data after listening to each of the twenty-four (24) audio-recorded interviews according to how the participants had responded to the interview questions. In the interviews, pseudonyms were used for individual interviews and letters of the alphabet were used to identify information as provided by the participants in the interviews and transcriptions for collating the information with respect to the study themes. Manual data processing ensued, and a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet was used to record the information processed from the interviews. The emergent patterns in the data were then categorised and compared to existing literature, resulting in synchronised data for documenting and reporting the findings.

## 3. Findings

### 3.1. Biographical Information

Personal information about the participants was sought to begin the interviews in order to develop a biographical portrait of the twenty-four widows who took part in both the individual interviews and the focus group interviews. Personal information that the participants revealed centred on their ages, number and gender of children, size of the household and the level of education. Tables 1 and 2 summarise the personal details of the participants.

**Table 1.** Personal details of participants from individual interviews.

Name of Participant	Age in Years	No. of Children	Gender of Children	No. of People in Household	Level of Education
Anna (BN)	43	5	3 girls 2 boys	9	Grade 7
Maria (BN)	48	1	1 girl	4	Grade 2
Kumbayile (BN)	54	1	1 boy	3	Grade 1
Julia (BN)	37	3	2 girls 1 boy	5	Form 2
Choolwe (BN)	56	7	5 girls 2 boys	4	Never went to school
Siphiwe (BS)	52	1	1 boy	5	Grade 5
Esnathi (BS)	Not known (lost ID)	2	1 boy 1 girl	4	Never went to school
Chipo (BS)	68	5	4 girls 1 boy	5	Never went to school
Bina Chi (BS)	58	1	1 girl	2	Never went to school
Esy (BS)	27	3	1 girl	5	Form 2

**Table 2.** Personal details of participants from focus group interviews.

Name of Participant	Age in Years	No. of Children	Gender of Children	Size of Household	Level of Education
Participant A (BN)	54	2	1 boy 1 girl	3	Grade 1
Participant B (BN)	56	4	all boys	4	Grade 1
Participant C (BN)	48	1	boy	4	Grade 2
Participant D (BN)	40	3	1 boy 2 girls	5	Form 2
Participant E (BN)	42	5	2 boys 3 girls	9	Grade 7
Participant F (BN)	43	3	2 boys 1 girl	6	Grade 7
Participant G (BN)	Unknown	3	1 boy 2 girls	5	Grade 1
Participant 1 (BS)	55	5	4 boys 1 girl	7	Grade 7
Participant 2 (BS)	53	1	girl	5	Grade 4
Participant 3 (BS)	28	3	all girls	6	Form 2
Participant 4 (BS)	68	5	1 boy 4 girls	6	Never attended school
Participant 5 (BS)	58	1	girl	2	Never went to school
Participant 6 (BS)	Unknown	2	1 boy 1 girl	4	Never went to school
Participant 7 (BS)	56	5	2 girls 3 boys	5	Never went to school

### 3.1.1. Ages of the Participants

Through the interviews with the participants, the study gathered that the ages of the widows ranged from 20 to 68 years old. Statistically, two of the participants were between the ages of 20 and 29, one was 30 to 39 whilst six were between the ages of 40 and 49. As depicted in Tables 1 and 2, the largest number of participants, (ten out of twenty-four), were in the age range of 50 to 59 years. Another two participants were between 60 and 69 years whilst three participants unfortunately did not know their age. The chronological age of the widows is significant in that it is a determinant of their ability to cope with stress associated with widowhood isolation and restricted mobility. Both young and older widows are prone to isolation as it is not age specific. Some studies in India revealed that both young and older widows could not attend religious activities and were even unable to seek health care for their physical ailments (Mohindra et al. 2012).

### 3.1.2. Number and Gender of Children

In lieu of the findings of the study, quite a significant number of widows (14 of the 24) had at least three to five children per widow. This number of children were dependent upon them and added to the worries that widows had when they are isolated from accessing socioeconomic amenities to help fend for them. Many of the children of the widows were girls which amplifies cultural exclusion in inheritance practices and norms as inheritance practices are passed on through the male line of descent (Mazingira Institute et al. 2020). Girls cannot be heirs to their father's inheritance which is overt gender discrimination (Fonjong et al. 2012). Interestingly, the female gender was prevalent amongst the genders of the widows' children predicting higher likelihood of exclusion and isolation in property inheritance discussions in families.

### 3.1.3. Sizes of the Households

Despite the psychosocial challenges that widows experience in Binga District, the study found that they had large family sizes and households. This suggested that, in addition to caring for and providing for their own children, widows were also responsible for caring for and providing for other dependents, thus stretching their meagre resources for providing for their family (Dube 2021).

### 3.1.4. Level of Education

The participants in the study had little to no formal education, according to the findings. Their educational background ranged from those who had never attended school to the most learned widow, who had managed to attend school up to only Form Two, the equivalent of grade 9 in other countries' education system. This compounded their vulnerability and incapacity to comprehend and negotiate their rights after their husbands died. It also made it more difficult to challenge socioeconomic isolation and exclusion. In Ghana, Korang-Okrah et al. (2019) found that better education among girls and women would likely reduce property inheritance disputes, isolation, and exclusion from socioeconomic amenities.

## 3.2. Isolation Experiences

The widows' experiences of isolation and how they were impacted by isolations deserves a critical discussion. During the interviews, the widows recounted various isolation experiences with negative impact of their well-being and the welfare of their children. Detrimental isolation of widows was evident and came in many forms embedded within cultural practices and oppressive norms within their communities of domicile. This affected the well-being and psychological and mental health of the widows (Peña-Longobardo et al. 2021).

### 3.2.1. Isolation from Critical Decision-Making

In the interviews, the widows recounted how they were isolated from major decisions that affect their lives including the lives of their children. Some cultural practices were used to socially isolate the widows so that they could not participate in major decisions. Some decisions on arranged levirate marriages, their husband's burial, or even the slaughtering of their beasts for feeding those who attended the funeral. The widows were not involved in these decisions, yet they directly affected the lives of the widows, their future, their resources and the management of resources that could be beneficial in countless ways. Out of the twenty-four (24) widows who participated in the study, twenty (20) widows were isolated from important decision-making following the death of their husbands. Some participants revealed the following during the interviews:

*"The problem arose on the cleansing ceremony (Widow cleansing is a ritual which demands a widow to have sexual intercourse with another man, normally one of her brothers-in-law in order to let the spirit of the deceased rest in peace among the dead (Saguti 2016)). They had already given me a husband before cleansing. The brother in-law had already said he will marry me before I knew it. All the relatives fought against me that I should get married and why am I refusing".* Participant D (BN).

*"When he died the brother came back home and we all marvelled why he had come back. When I asked him why he had come back, he said I have to come back because we buried my brother yesterday. Hh-a-a-a-a! (marvelling). I asked him why they buried him without notifying us here".* Bina Chi (BS).

*"Elders from my husband's side decided without consulting with me that the cow must be slaughtered for everybody to eat at the funeral as per tradition. I told them to read the letter which he wrote before he died, one of which was kept by his sister and the other one was kept by me. Both letters emphasized that everything belonged to me and the children and nobody should take anything. They (husband's parents) told me that they will not follow what was written".* Otilia (BS).

Drawing from other research findings, excluding widows from critical decision-making is also a common phenomenon. Despite widespread democracy in South Africa, Tembo (2012) found that widows were barred from making decisions that affect their families and their own lives. In Malawi, Sulumba-Kapuma (2018) shared similar findings of widows being excluded from critical decision about their life especially during the mourning period. The morning and the cleansing periods are regarded as periods in which the widow separates with the spirit of the dead and cannot partake in decisions as she must focus on separating herself from the dead husband. This is disempowering and makes the widows helpless as the practices are seen as part of the cultural norms.

### 3.2.2. Social Isolation

Whilst widows need social support after the death of their husband from their social circles, their yearning for such support is not always met as people that should be providing social support isolate them. In the study, 66.6% of the widows experienced social isolation. There are strong beliefs that the widowed person needs to be isolated as she carries the spirit of the deceased. Due to such beliefs, the widow is bound to be socially isolated which further depreciates her psychological well-being (Shumbamhini 2020). In the study, the widows shared the following extracts:

*"Community members have stayed away from me. It's only the church members are relatives to me now".* Siphwiwe (BS).

*"I was still mourning whilst waiting to attend the traditional ceremony. I was surprised when I was told not to attend".* Nomai (BN).

*"I sometimes have high blood pressure. People talk a lot, and it pains me a lot. People accuse me that since I am not married, I will take their husbands and that is being spoken about a lot here. Some even say my hut should be burnt just for no apparent reason. People*

*no longer respect me since I got widowed. THIS A BIG PROBLEM THAT I HAVE! ((Adds emphasis))". Choolwe (BN).*

Research has found that even though widows may be in different geographical areas and settings, the experience of social isolation is identical. In Kathmandu in Nepal, widows have been described as “socially dead”, a term used to describe the extremes of loss of social ties and networks and shame over the status of widowhood (Houston et al. 2016). Among the Tswana people of South Africa, Tembo (2012) found that widows were socially isolated and feared as they were regarded as dangerous to people, animals and even plants. Such a belief system could be the reason why some community members wanted to burn down Choolwe’ hut in Binga District as revealed in this study.

### 3.2.3. Isolation from Economic Resources

The death of their husbands seems to spell doom for the economic resources of the widows in low-resourced communities. Before the death of their husbands, widows seem to have accrued some resources that helped in meeting their economic needs. However, upon the death of their husband, widows cannot access the economic resources as they are generally side-lined by in-laws as they grab the resources from the excluded and vulnerable widows. In the interviews with the widows, twenty-two (22) widows expressed their grief over the additional loss to economic resources after their husbands’ death. The participants revealed their economic exclusions this way:

*“During the funeral all was well. The problem started when we were fighting over the land after the funeral. The relatives wanted to take the land and we were promised to be beaten over that land. As for me, it gave me heartaches to be beaten by somebody’s husband when my husband did not do it until he died. I left and re-joined my natal family”.* Participant C (BN).

*“When my husband died, they (relatives of the husband) grabbed ALL the property, land and cows and ordered me to leave the home. This caused a big problem because I am an orphan, my parents had died a long time ago. I had nowhere to go with my very young children. I tried to find a place to stay at one of my relatives’ homes but could not allow me to stay”.* Sophia (BS).

*“A-a-a! Immediately after his death and whilst I was still mourning his death, they (relatives of the husband) demanded the tuck-shop we had and household items that we had BEFORE HE WAS EVEN BURIED. He was buried on Sunday and on Tuesday, they wanted the cow which I bought myself from the money I got from growing cotton”.* Otilia (BS).

Isolating and depriving the widows access to accrued economic resources and finances has drawn the attention of humanitarian agencies, research, and legal institutions as these turn into overt tensions between the widows and those that isolate the widows, especially in-laws. Widows often decry such practices as they lose means for sustenance turning them into immediate welfare cases. Available literature on the economic problems of widows has revealed economic isolation and deprivation as a major issue among the widows leading to widespread economic insecurity and poverty amongst them (Houston et al. 2016; Mohindra et al. 2012; Tembo 2012; United Nations (UN) Women (2021)).

### 3.3. The Impact of Isolation on Widows

An important aspect to deepen understanding is the impact of isolation on widows. An analysis of how widows are impacted by various forms of isolation is critical for practical interventions by various intervention agencies. In its various forms, isolation of widows impacts them in various ways as described in the subsequent discussions.

#### 3.3.1. Psychological Challenges

One of the most prominent impacts of isolation evident in the findings of the study is psychological in nature. Whilst widows were still mourning the deaths of their loved

ones, isolations further exacerbated the impact of their loved ones. In the study, 75% of the widows shared the psychological challenges they experienced due to isolation. The extent of psychological impact on the widows has resulted in some illnesses among the widows. Further, the tones in the verbal articulations by the widows provided evidence that widows were impacted deeply in several ways. This is what widows articulated:

*“It pained me in my thoughts, and I was even diagnosed with high blood pressure (BP). I was thinking hard about the death of my husband and that I was left alone here, and I do not come from this place. I come from Mucheso ((about 90 km away))’.* Participant A (BN).

*“I had painful thoughts, even now they still attack me. These thoughts are very painful. People will think that at night I do sleep when I don’t’.* Participant 2 (BS).

*“The stress that I had nearly killed me. The way I was treated, the way they never wanted me to know or get me involved in anything! Is losing a husband really like this?’.* Participant G (BN).

*“I was numb with stress. I was alone with the problem of processing the birth certificate of my child. I didn’t know who to seek help from especially they my husband’s family didn’t want to hear anything from me’.* Participant D (BN).

The explicit evidence from this study that reveals the psychological impact of isolation of widows is of great concern, especially that the widows are left without social support to relieve and deal with psychological problems (Tembo 2012; Orphans In Need 2022). Another research has found that such deep psychological problems among widows have resulted in higher risks of suicide (Navaneelan 2012).

### 3.3.2. Perpetuation of Violence on the Widow

The oppression associated with widowhood is a precursor of violence perpetrated towards the widows in many ways. Widows become emotionally, socially and physically fragile resulting from the loss of the husband coupled with isolation. Some widows who try to resist certain practices which they deem as oppressive and violating their rights experience further violence perpetrated on them. The verbal articulations of the widows below show how some widows experienced violence.

*“There is a lot of anger on the fact that I refused to marry my brother in-law’.* Participant E (BN).

*“When I remained alone, another man wanted to beat me. Since my place of origin was far away. The brother in-law also wanted to beat me over the land we had’.* Participant A (BN).

Isolation seemingly predisposes widows to violence perpetrated mainly by the in-laws over forced decisions and economic resources. What makes violence more common is that the natal family who should be protecting the widow from violence seems to abandon the widow on the basis that they have received the bride-price and hence the in-laws have control over the life of the widow (Shumbamhini 2020). Such familial isolation has resulted in manipulation of the widow’s life and aggression. Other researchers have attributed violence towards the widows to the supremacy of culture and internalised submissiveness of the widows (Ajayi et al. 2019).

### 3.3.3. Reduced Resources for Personal and Family Care

The extent to which widows are isolated from economic resources is worrisome in Binga District. Isolation of the widow from economic resources leaves the widows without tangible economic resources for their sustenance. The loss of economic resources is insurmountable especially considering that widows lose husbands who were providers to the family (Dube 2016). This has resulted in widows falling short on meeting personal and family needs. The following extracts reveals the predicament of the widows:

*“The pension that came out through his name they shared it all and they lied that I signed for it and I got it. I was left with nothing to buy what my children needs. Yea, that’s what I experienced”*. Participant 2 (BS).

*“We had a misunderstanding with my husband’s brother about the land we used for growing food ((meaning fields)). We were left with nothing to grow food for the family on. Then I thought it’s better to go back to my natal family. The people who had given us the land for ploughing wanted it back since my husband had died”*. Maria (BN).

Research has established growing concern in the low-resourced communities on the grabbing of economic resources from widows whilst isolating them and their children from accessing the resources (Awuor 2013; International Organization for Migration 2016; Ngoveni 2021). Such acts perpetrated against the widows have resisted the test of legal interventions as they are embedded in culture. This has resulted in the deteriorating of livelihoods and welfare of the widows and their children (Korang-Okrah et al. 2019; Mazingira Institute et al. 2020).

#### 4. Discussion of Findings

This paper contributes significantly to the knowledge in the field of social work. It is the first and unique paper in the field of social work that shares significant knowledge on the various isolation experiences of the widows in low-resources communities, Binga District being the case in point. It contributes to the body of knowledge and discusses the impact of isolation of widows on the widows and the welfare of their children. It is important therefore to discuss the findings of the study and provide a critical analysis with regards to biographical information of the widows, isolation experiences and the impact of isolation on the widows.

##### 4.1. Biographical Information of the Widows

The ages of the participants have been very critical in understanding how isolation of the widows could affect the various age groups. Most of the widows, nineteen of the twenty-four, were in their young adulthood age, at least when they experienced social isolation upon the death of their husbands. A calculation of their ages was done to check when they experienced isolation at the time they participated in the study. The age calculation showed that nineteen widows were between 19 to 39 years of age which Erik Erickson’s psychosocial theory describes as the intimacy versus isolation stage (Cherry 2021). Erik Erickson’s theory posits that human development and progress have been influenced by social interaction and relationships among each other and draws attention to social experiences and conflicts and how these affect various aspects of human development.

In lieu of the findings, nineteen of the widows were in the stage of intimacy versus isolation when their husbands died. This means they experienced more isolations first from the death of their husbands and secondly from supportive social relationships with relatives and community members resulting intense feelings of loneliness, depression, health problems and suicide (Cherry 2021).

The widows also had children to look after and support, with many of their children being girls. This means isolating the widows from accessing needed socioeconomic resources resulted in children suffering. They could not meet the needs of their children. The gender of the children further amplified the entrenched social stigma that blocks girls from inheriting their deceased fathers’ estates, property land and other economic resources (Mazingira Institute et al. 2020). This was one factor that has intensified the isolation of widows from accessing property and other economic resources in Binga District (Dube 2016).

Amid isolation from socioeconomic resources, the study found that widows had large family sizes. The families included their own children and other dependents in their care. Their struggle with various forms of isolation did not discourage widows to be caregivers to their dependents. This signifies the worth and value they place towards families. This gesture from the widows provides the basis for arguing that if given necessary

support, widows can have stable and healthy families in low-resourced communities (Ndabarushimana and Dushime 2018).

In perpetuating isolation of the widows from socioeconomic amenities and critical decision making about the widows' lives, lower levels of education have been lamented and criticised among widows in low-resourced communities (Dube 2016; Tayo and Chukwuedozie 2013). Further, lack of education is associated with lack of practical knowledge on accessing information on their rights as women and widows to help curb their abuse.

#### 4.2. Isolation of Widows and Its Impact

In lieu of the study's findings, there is evidence that widows are isolated. However, it is crucial to point out that many of these forms of isolations are intertwined, lead into each other or exacerbate other forms of isolations. The study's findings showed that widows have experienced a host of isolations which included isolation from critical decisions, social isolation and isolation from socioeconomic resources and amenities. These isolations are structured, embedded and done in the context of structured cultural practices which are sentimental and difficult to resist or escape on the part of the widows (Fonjong et al. 2012).

Upon the death of her husband, a widow is expected to be socially isolated and not allowed to mingle with other people as she is seen to be carrying the spirit of the dead. The widow is also exposed to elongated periods of mourning until such a time that she is culturally deemed clean. Ironically, during this time, critical decisions are made about her personal life such as marrying a family member or how the dissolution of property will be undertaken by the elders. Her social isolation results in missing out on critical decisions that affect her life. It can be argued that this is a conspiracy to exclude her from important decisions and that cleansing the spirit of the dead is used to isolate her.

Other forms of isolation of widows accompany isolation from critical decisions. Isolation from socioeconomic resources and amenities are common and are associated with increased poverty levels among the widows (Fonjong et al. 2012; Ndabarushimana and Dushime 2018; Pemunta and Alubafi 2016). Socioeconomic resources remain the central target for isolation of widows. Where widows lived with their in-laws, it seems in-laws are generally not prepared to relinquish any source of sustenance to them. In cases where the widow lived with the husband and children, in-laws unleash violent property and socioeconomic grabs. There is ever growing tension between the widows and in-laws over socioeconomic resources with the widows having to face evictions from tillable land, property and houses which they lived in. The major reason for this is that the widow cannot be a beneficiary of the socioeconomic resources as she came with nothing from her natal family and therefore shall leave with nothing upon the death of the husband. Some researchers have construed such acts by the widows' in-laws as violence and greedy and responsible for the deterioration of the welfare of widows and their children (Adeyemo 2016).

Some of the reasons why in-laws isolate widows from accessing socioeconomic resources for sustenance are complex to comprehend. With a critical look at some instances in which it has happened, it would be reasonable to attribute such acts to poverty among the widows' in-laws. In Zambia, for instance, isolating the widows from accessing property and other socioeconomic resources increased during the period of covid19 when many people lost jobs and modes of sustenance were drastically reduced (Sinkala 2022). Increases of disputes have also been registered in Zambian magistrates' courts during the same period.

The study also found that isolations of various forms have detrimental consequences for the welfare of the widows and their children. The intensive emotions associated with isolation from decision making and social isolation cause stress and depression for the widows. This is attributed to the lack of social support needed during the time of loss, bereavement, and mourning (Houston et al. 2016). Additional stress and depression result from the fact that when major decisions about their lives are made, the widows are excluded, yet such decisions require the direct involvement of the widows creating more anxiety regarding what will be decided about the widows' lives especially their inheritance and the custody of their children.

## 5. Limitations of the Study

This study had some limitations embedded in it. The individual interviews were done in the homes of the widows and interruptions such as visitors entering the homes of the participants and the crying of babies disturbed the flow of interviews as they required pauses in recordings. However, the recordings helped in making the participants aware of what they were saying before the interruptions.

Another limitation was that the interviews were done in Tonga language spoken in the Binga District. During the verbatim transcriptions, some Tonga words were difficult to put into English language. The researcher had to seek two translation services. One translated Tonga into English and the other did a reverse translation to increase the trustworthiness of the findings.

## 6. Conclusions and Recommendations

There were several conclusions drawn from the study. The study concludes that widows experience various forms of isolation upon the death of their husbands. These forms of isolation are imposed on widows mainly by in-laws. Another convincing conclusion is that in-laws are opportunistic as they use cultural norms to perpetuate violence on the bereaved widows.

The study concluded that the natal families of the widows relinquished their power to exercise decisions about the widows when they got married. The bride price paid during the marriage process reduced the widows to commodities as their natal families could not make decisions about the widows' lives. Some natal families could not accept the widows back into the family citing the paid bride price and cultural norms that do not permit the widows to re-join the natal families after dissolution of marriage or death of the husband.

It can be concluded that the various forms of isolations experienced by widows result in several psychological, social, physical, and economic consequences that impact negatively on the welfare of the widows and their children. The study revealed that isolating widows when their husbands die results in stress, anxiety, and depressive tendencies that emanate from the deep psychological impact of these isolations. Widows also lose self-esteem, worth and dignity and find it difficult to mingle with other community members in cases where they are cleansed and culturally allowed to do so. They lose friends who are also suspicious about the "perceived danger" the widow could cause in their lives. Deep stress, depression, and lack of social support results in somatoform disorders, poor self-care, poor eating habits and other health issues (Goodman 2020).

The study also concludes that economic isolations have reduced the resource-base of the widows to take care of themselves and their children. Their welfare and that of their children are impacted negatively as the widows are forced into absolute poverty and left without needed resources to meet their daily needs.

Drawing from the findings of the study, significant practical recommendations have been made to assist in resolving the isolations experienced by the widows. The isolations experienced by widows mainly stem from cultural norms that have been practiced since time immemorial, it is recommended that dialogue and negotiated solutions be done with traditional leaders in the communities. Imposed solutions to the situations of the widows may not gain wide acceptance and may not be practical to deal with issues of cultural norms passed from one generation to another. Engaging the traditional leaders on the safety of widows can be a viable option especially how the isolation of widows is embedded with traditional norms and culture fervently monitored by traditional leaders in their roles as custodians of these traditions.

It is recommended that married couples should write wills on how they wish their property to be dissolved upon their death. These wills should be valid, not simply papers written by the husband without the advice of legal experts as some participants described experiencing in the study. For the will to be valid, it must be signed by a testator, (a person who makes a will), two witnesses and by a commissioner of oaths (FinLaw 2021). However, with legal advice generally lacking in low-resourced communities, there is need for the

non-governmental sector to provide services in such areas. Various non-governmental organizations have programmes in Binga District, but additional focus is needed to include will-writing in addition to food aid programmes. This will also aid in disseminating information on will-writing in the district. Also, the process of writing wills needs to be witnessed by the community leaders who will support the widows together with the legal and social work professionals in fighting disinheritance if widows experience property inheritance problems and isolation from socioeconomic resources.

The financial and economic policies of the government in Zimbabwe need to be improved. The government needs to reconsider budget allocations in the Ministry of Women Affairs for the improvement of the widows' lives specifically. The budget for programmes that improve the livelihoods of widows should be in the policies of all government spheres which are local, provincial, and national government. This will also help to ensure monitoring and accountability mechanisms for widows' intervention programmes. The National Gender Policy of 2013, the National Social Protection Policy Framework for Zimbabwe and the National Development Strategy need to improve to cater for the needs of the widows (Kurevakwesu et al. 2021).

It is recommended that responsive policies be adopted in Zimbabwe from various stakeholders who provide protection services such as the Zimbabwe Republic Police and the Ministry of Justice to ensure streamlined and coordinated services.

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