Burdened by Rites, Anchored in Strength: A Qualitative Exploration of Widowhood Practices and Their Implications for Food Security Among Bukusu and Maasai Women in Kenya

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Abstract- ***Widowhood is a universal life event that is deeply shaped by socio-cultural contexts that redefine women's status, rights, and resource access after the loss of a spouse. This research paper presents the qualitative findings that are part of an embedded mixed methods study that explored how widowhood practices affect food security among widows in Webuye West and Kajiado West Sub counties of Bungoma and Kajiado Counties in Kenya respectively. Using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the study engaged 35 widows (20 Bukusu and 15 Maasai) through in-depth interviews (IDIs), and supported by four focus group discussions (FGDs). Findings indicate that widowhood practices such as cleansing rituals, inheritance expectations, land denial, and social isolation severely constrain autonomy and access to food by widows. Nevertheless, widows demonstrated resilience by leveraging informal support, spiritual faith and adaptive strategies. Grounded in African Feminist Theory and informed by Symbolic Interactionism, Social Systems and Empowerment theories, the analysis highlights the complex interaction between cultural norms and women's agency. The research calls for culturally sensitive, rights-based policies to enable widows and improve food security while respecting cultural identities in Kenya.***

Indexed Terms- ***Widowhood, Widowhood practices, Food security, Bukusu, Maasai.***

I. INTRODUCTION

Over 258 million widows globally, still endure widespread discrimination, food insecurity and economic marginalisation (UN Women, 2021). In Africa, widowhood is influenced by a complex interplay of cultural, sociological, and economic factors, deeply embedded in patriarchal norms and often disadvantageous legal systems (Adeyemo, 2016 2021).

In Kenya, legal protections for widows are provided by the Constitution (2010), the Marriage Act (2012), and the Law of Succession Act (2022), yet they continue to face marginalisation. The Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) notes that despite women producing the bulk (80%) of the food (FAO, 2023), their access to land and participation in agricultural activities remain limited, undermining their ability to achieve household food security (Dillon & Voena, 2018; Nnoko, 2020). Subsequently, these systemic barriers have been found to threaten household food security (Nnoko, 2020) and hinder broader development goals (Doss et al., 2017).

Grounded in a Social transformation approach, the findings presented in this paper are based on the following research question:

1. How do socio-cultural practices that are associated with widowhood influence household food security among widows in the Bukusu and Maasai communities of Webuye West and Kajiado West Sub-counties, Kenya?

While existing research has largely focused on widows' general experiences (Momanyi et al., 2021; Makanga, 2022), few studies have explicitly examined effects of widowhood practices on household food security. This study addresses this gap by linking socio-cultural dynamics with food security outcomes, highlighting widows' voices, resilience and potential for social transformation.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Widowhood and Socio-Cultural Contexts

Widowhood, is a universal experience shaped by diverse cultural interpretations and practices, and has profound implications for household food security (UN Women, 2021). The loss of a husband often compromises a woman's access to fundamental rights and dignity.

In India, for example, Atwal (2023) highlights how widows are restricted from public and religious life, with prevailing beliefs about misfortune and rigid inheritance customs further deepen their socio-economic marginalisation.

In Africa, widowhood rites are deeply entrenched in cultural traditions (Dube, 2023). In some communities, these practices have also been found to perpetuate gender inequalities; they expose widows to stigma, discrimination, and disinheritance (Amoo et al., 2022).

In Kenya, widowhood customs vary widely across communities and regions. However, they significantly shape access to resources and support networks by the widows. At the same time, they have been documented as intensifying economic vulnerability and food insecurity in many other contexts (Nnoko, 2020).

Among the Bukusu in Kenya for example, Maelo (2014) and Mayende et al. (2022) have documented how widowhood rites are elaborate including: seclusion, head-shaving and sexual cleansing; the rites symbolize ritual impurity and reinforce male control. These practices have been shown to reduce widows' autonomy and often result in economic dependency (Simiyu et al., 2020).

While the Maasai in Kenya have distinct cultural practices, they still practice communal land tenure practices (Fuchs, 2021). This combined with the patriarchal nature of the community that embraces polygamy, early marriages and low literacy levels (*Maasai Culture*, 2024), poses significant vulnerabilities to household food security for the widows.

2.2 Widowhood and Religion

Religious institutions, particularly Christian churches, on one hand, play a dual role of emphasizing compassion for widows. On the other hand, they discourage harmful traditional practices (Wekesa &Ahaya, 2020).

African Traditional Religion (ATR) serves as a bedrock worldview through which Africans interpret spiritual and moral challenges while supporting social cohesion (Ani, 2024). However, the coexistence of Christianity and ATR is not without conflicts, especially regarding widowhood practices, as traditional rituals frequently contradict Christian doctrines (Ani, 2024).

In Kenya, the colonial and pre-colonial eras greatly shaped the interaction between Christianity and African traditional religio-cultural practices (Mayende et al., 2022). The Bukusu community, for example, had specific widowhood rites that were integral to their cultural identity (Wekesa & Ahaya, 2020) and the Friends (Quaker) Church, among other churches, continues to play a pivotal role in integrating the two. The Maasai worship a God called Enkai who is believed to be both benevolent and punitive (*Maasai Culture*, 2024). Ceremonial events are directed by a ritual expert (*oloiboni*); despite external influences, the Maasai persist in preserving their unique religious and cultural beliefs (Holidify, 2023).

2.3 Widow Inheritance and Remarriage

Levirate marriage is the practice where a deceased man's brother is obligated to marry his brother's widow; this is observed in various cultures (Westreich, 2018). Levirate marriage is practised globally, and for instance among the Jews, it is intended to preserve

family lineage and protect the widow (Westreich, 2018).

In Many African patrilineal societies widow inheritance is practised to preserve lineage, protect family property and provide widows with social and economic support (Amoo et al., 2022). However, its acceptance significantly varies by region, culture and religion (UN Women, 2017).

The practice is deeply entrenched in some Kenyan communities like the Luo (Akinyi, 2023; Kirwen, 1979) and widely observed in many others like the Luhya of Western Kenya. Among the Bukusu, Boosuuro (2021) and Maelo (2014) extensively narrate the series of rituals and ceremonies that a grieving widow must go through after the death of her husband.

The Maasai too have distinct customs and rituals surrounding death which may vary across different Maasai sub-groups (*Death and Inheritance in the Maasai Society*, n.d.). Marriage is considered as a social contract between two families and bridewealth is paid, the woman belongs to the husband even in death (Visitnatives, 2025).

2.4 Land Tenure and Ownership

Globally, widows are marginalized in land ownership due to customary and statutory laws that inadequately protect their rights (UN Women, 2021). In Africa, land tenure and ownership were affected by colonialism which disrupted traditional practices (Kodiyo, 2023).
In Kenya, colonial era interventions such as the Swynnerton plan of 1954 disrupted traditional land tenure systems. It ultimately ended up displacing indigenous communities; it left widows increasingly vulnerable (Kodiyo, 2023; Dillon & Voena, 2018).
Co-existence of statutory and customary law under legal pluralism creates enforcement tensions, particularly regarding inheritance and property rights (Gitahi, 2025). Although legislative measures like the Matrimonial Property Act (2013) promote equity, weak implementation combined with legal ambiguities, continues to undermine widows' rights (Nnoko, 2020).

Among the Bukusu, customary laws and social norms typically require widows to remain on their late husband's land if they are to be considered for inheritance (Makanga, 2022). Likewise, among the Maasai of Kajiado County, land is still communally held hence affecting ownership among the widows (Kaoga et al., 2021).

2.5 Stigma and Isolation of Widows

Worldwide, widows face restricted access to resources and weakened support systems due to patriarchal norms and social exclusion, which directly threaten household food security (UN Women, 2021). In India, this marginalisation, along with societal stigma, deprives individuals of identity, community support, and self-respect (Atwal, 2023).

In many African contexts, land, livestock and wealth are controlled by male relatives and inherited patrilineally (Adeyemo, 2016). Hence, widows without formal ownership often lose access to these resources after their husbands' death (Adeyemo, 2016).

In Kenya, widows experience considerable food insecurity as a result of patriarchy, societal stigma, and isolation. Female-headed households, frequently encounter significant food insecurity due to marginalisation (Munala, 2022). Among the Maasai, isolation due to the patriarchal system means that widows have limited say in decisions regarding food production activities further weakening their food security status (Kaoga et al., 2021).

2.6 Widowhood and Food Security

Widows face disproportionate food insecurity globally. This is associated with gender inequalities in land, capital and agricultural inputs and resources (FAO, 2023). In Sub-Sharan Africa (SSA), 40% of crop production is linked to women, despite the challenges they face in accessing resources and services (FAO, 2021).

In Kenya, widows contribute substantially to agricultural production despite numerous challenges faced (Korir et al., 2021). Bungoma County, Kenya, persistently experiences significant food insecurity,

with poverty and food poverty rates surpassing the national average (Bungoma CIDP, 2023). Food insecurity in Kajiado County, Kenya, is fuelled by climate change, land degradation, and population growth (Gitau, 2023).

2.7 Theoretical Framework

This study integrated African Feminist Theory, Symbolic Interactionism, Social Systems Theory, and Empowerment Theory to comprehensively examine how cultural widowhood practices influence widows' access to food and food security.

African Feminist Theory (Mama, 2019) underlines African women's agency. At the same time, it interrogates patriarchal structures that marginalize widows along intersecting lines of gender, ethnicity, and class (Dube, 2023).

Symbolic Interactionism highlights how widows interpret and negotiate the meanings of rituals and social roles. It reveals how cultural symbols reinforce stigma or enable resistance (Miroslav, 2023).

The Social Systems Theory situates widowhood within broader institutional frameworks which include: the family, clan, religion, and law. These institutions shape the social inclusion and resource access aspects for the widows (Gibson, 2024; Akahori, 2021).

Empowerment Theory emphasizes the capacities of widows to challenge constraints and mobilize resources for survival and autonomy despite the persistence of systemic barriers they continue to experience (Mama 2019).

Together, these theories provided a multi-dimensional lens. This was used to analyze the interplay of socio-cultural expectations and institutional forces that impact widows lived experiences and food security in the Bukusu and Maasai contexts.

III. RESEARCH METHODS

3.1 Research Design and Rationale

This study adopted an embedded mixed-methods design with a qualitative dominant strand. It aimed to explore how socio-cultural practices associated with widowhood affect household food security among widows in Webuye West and Kajiado West sub-counties.

The qualitative component, which is the focus of this article, was grounded in Interpretive Phenomenology which was used to examine the lived experiences and meaning-that widows attach to the widowhood practices within their specific cultural contexts. This approach was appropriate for capturing the emotional, symbolic, and structural dimensions of widowhood and its intersections with food insecurity.

3.2 Study Sites and Sampling of Participants

The study was conducted in two rural sub-counties of Kenya: Webuye West in Bungoma County, predominantly inhabited by the Bukusu community, and Kajiado West in Kajiado County, home to the Maasai. These sites were selected due to their distinct yet comparably patriarchal socio-cultural frameworks governing widowhood.

A total of 35 widows participated in IDIs; 20 from the Bukusu community and 15 from the Maasai community. Participants were purposively selected based on the criteria. These included being widowed for at least one year, having dependents under their care, and being engaged in food production or provision activities. To enhance contextual understanding, data were triangulated with four FGDs (two per community).

3.3 Data Collection Methods

Data were collected from widows and key informants in Webuye West and Kajiado West using several methods to gather comprehensive information on the research topic.

1. IDIs: focused on personal experiences related to widowhood and food security.
2. FGDs): Involved 6–15 participants. Moderation was done jointly by trained facilitators and supervisors.

3.4 Data Analysis

Due to the sensitive nature of the subject and cultural dynamics, some interviews were conducted without audio recordings. Some of the recordings were done in the local dialects (Kibukusu and Maa). These were carefully transcribed and translated directly into English language by the research team, to accurately capture culturally specific expressions and contextual meaning.

All transcripts (in English) were uploaded into *Taguette*, an open-source qualitative analysis tool, to assist with systematic tagging and coding. Analysis then proceeded manually through an iterative process of close reading, coding and theme development. Verbatim quotes were used to reflect participants' voices, enhancing the authenticity and credibility of the findings.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity was central to this study which focused on vulnerable populations (widows). Ethical clearance was secured through the Tangaza University Institutional Science and Ethical Review Committee (TU-ISERC). A research permit was subsequently obtained from the National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI), authorized data collection in Bungoma and Kajiado counties. Participants provided written informed consent after being fully briefed on the purpose of the study. Confidentiality was ensured by omitting identifying information and using coded data.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

The study engaged 35 widows across Webuye West and Kajiado West sub-counties, exploring socio-demographic variables that illuminate structural vulnerabilities linked to widowhood and food insecurity. Most respondents were aged 50 and above, with a substantial proportion (40%) over 60, underscoring age-related limitations in labour and income generation. Younger widows under 40 comprised only 8.6%, indicating limited representation or possible greater mobility. The predominance of older widows (74.3% aged >50) reflects how widowhood intersects with aging and gendered poverty, especially in rural settings where labour is physical and social support systems are informal.

Education levels revealed notable regional disparities: while half of widows in Webuye West Sub County attained primary education and 25% secondary education, 73.3% of Kajiado West Sub-Countywidows had no formal schooling. Such gaps signal uneven access to education, affecting awareness of rights and ability to secure resources. The minimal formal education in Kajiado West Sub-County (73.3% without schooling) illustrates systemic gender exclusion, perpetuating economic dependency and marginalization in land rights and policy participation. Education levels in Webuye West Sub-County indicate relatively higher potential for civic engagement or access to institutional support, though limitations remain.

Marriage patterns showed early union as the norm, with over 62% marrying between ages 16 and 20 and 11.4% marrying at 15 or younger, particularly in Kajiado West Sub-County highlighting cultural traditions of early marriage. Most respondents had been married for two to four decades, pointing to entrenched marital ties and extended exposure to socio-cultural widowhood practices. Early marriage (11.4% married ≤15 years; 62.9% between 16–20) reveals gendered social norms and reproductive expectations, often limiting educational attainment and delaying personal agency.

Widowhood among respondents was often a prolonged condition, with 45.7% widowed for over 15 years highlighting enduring vulnerability and sustained lack of social support. A substantial majority (82.9%) were single-handedly raising 4 to 6 children, intensifying economic and emotional burdens within these households. Such extended durations of widowhood point to gendered marginalization, where customary norms may undermine autonomy and restrict access to communal resources. Over time, this status evolves into a socially ingrained role that can reinforce stigma and hinder participation in public and economic spheres.

Economic hardship was widespread, with nearly 89% of widows surviving on less than 3,000 KES ($23 USD) monthly. Poverty was particularly pronounced in Webuye West Sub-County. Employment opportunities were narrowly concentrated in domestic work (40%) and subsistence farming (28.6%), though small-scale trade was more common in Kajiado West Sub-County, showcasing regional variation in livelihood strategies. Formal sector engagement remained low, reflecting limited access to stable employment or pension schemes.

The prevalence of large households and low incomes (88.6% earning ≤3,000 KES) underscores significant challenges to securing food and education, especially where women are sole providers. Regional differences in income and education point to uneven institutional support and infrastructural development. Overall, widows navigate restrictive social environments that inadequately respond to their changing needs, exposing critical gaps in policy frameworks and social protection mechanisms.

4.2 Rites and Rituals Associated with Death

Widowhood rites in both the Bukusu and Maasai communities are elaborate, symbolically loaded, and highly gendered. Rooted in spiritual and communal beliefs, these rituals often disrupt widows' ability to engage in food production or access economic resources.

4.2.1 Bukusu Widowhood Rites

Among the Bukusu, widowhood is marked by elaborate rituals including *Sitekho*, *Khuswala Kumuse*, *Khukhwila*, and *Lufu*. These rites involve seclusion, head shaving, and designated cooking roles, signifying a transition from marital identity to a liminal social state. The widow is referred to as *Namulekhwa*, meaning "one who has been left," underscoring her altered status within the community.

The findings indicate that while all the widows interviewed participated in widowhood rituals, each experienced them in a unique and personal way.
One widow described her initiation into widowhood as follows:

I had to scream to alert the family and neighbours that my husband had died. Then I was sent to my father's home for the S*itekho*. My family bought me a new dress and some food to bring back to my marital home to cook for my family. (Widow 015, Webuye).

This ritual act symbolized her movement from a marital to a liminal state, redefining her social role. The enforced seclusion was a form of social control, often supervised by senior widows.

As another widow narrated:
An older widow *(Omusicha)* is picked to cook for the widow because at this point, the widow is not supposed to mingle freely with other people. She is put in isolation. If the widow had strayed outside the marriage norms (had sexual relations with another man), namely, *khulia chimbeba* (literally translated - *eating rats*), the elderly women will prepare some special herbs for her to take before she can come near the body of the husband. If this is not done, it is believed, the widow would die very soon after burial of the husband. (Widow 001, Webuye).

This seclusion removes the widow from her productive role in the household and community, particularly in subsistence agriculture, which is a primary source of food and income. The loss of labour during peak agricultural periods can lead to reduced yields, diminished household food stocks, and increased reliance on external support.

Seclusion during the mourning period emerged as a notable practice among widows in Webuye. This was consistently reported by participants from the region.
One widow explained: "During the mourning period, the widow is expected to stay indoors for about 40 days, refraining from participating in family or community activities until further rituals are performed." (Widow 004, Webuye).

Beyond symbolic exclusion, the rituals also imposed financial burdens. One widow lamented, "My late husband's family demanded my family to bring a cow for slaughter. We couldn't afford it." (Widow 004, Webuye).

Another widow narrated:
"My late husband's family demanded that my family bring a cow for slaughter, but we could not afford one. This caused tension and made me feel powerless, especially in a time when resources were already strained." (Widow 011, Webuye).

Widowhood rituals, while culturally meaningful, impose significant financial burdens on widows and their families. The requirement to provide expensive items such as livestock redirects resources away from essential needs like food, heightening economic strain and contributing to household food insecurity. The inability to meet these expectations can lead to social tensions and isolation, further limiting the widow's access to communal support. These findings underscore how traditional practices, though symbolic, can deepen vulnerability and compromise food security during mourning.

Following the burial, several important rituals mark the transition and affirm the passing of the household head. Post-burial rituals continued to impose social demands on the widows.

The *lufu* refers to death or the ceremony that is performed three days after death to settle the debts of the deceased and where the clan or family elder appoints someone to take care of the widow and her family. According to the Bukusu, it is also the day the spirit of the deceased leaves the body, more like the Jewish tradition in which faithful believe Jesus Christ resurrected from the dead on the third day.

As one widow from Webuye narrated: "Three days after burial, they called a *lufu* meeting. I shaved my hair, and the cut hair and the razor blade were placed on the grave." (Widow 005, Webuye).

Another widow in Webuye recounted:
On the same day, clan elders perform a traditional ceremony by strangling and roasting a cock at an outdoor fire (*sitioli*), symbolizing the death of the family leader. Specific household items including the *lusuli* (a pointing stick on the roof) and one of the three cooking stones (*liika*), are removed at midnight by a trusted person, often the widow or a close relative. (Widow 004, Webuye).

These objects are believed to hold powerful spiritual significance, and failure to remove them is thought to bring curses or death to the family. These practices underscore the cultural importance of mourning and purification, while also imposing social restrictions on the widow.

These rituals, while symbolically significant, often disrupt widows' access to food production, economic resources, and social autonomy. The findings reveal that such practices impose both emotional and financial burdens, reinforcing structural inequalities during a period of vulnerability.

4.2.2 Maasai Widowhood Rites

However, among the Maasai, such elaborate rituals were not reported by the respondents. Similar but different rituals conveyed spiritual continuity.

Maasai rites also involved elaborate symbolic acts. One Maasai widow recounted:
We laid him on his right side on his skin, and planted a tree called Oseki (to symbolise continuation of life) by his head. A fat cow was slaughtered. The eldest son poured milk around his mouth and some of the fat was applied on his body." (Widow 035, Kajiado).

The same widow continued to explain: "The fire lit using sacred wood had to burn until burial (....). It showed that his spirit still lived among us." (Widow 035, Kajiado).

Yet, another noted modernity is altering these rites:
"These days, we bury the Christian way. The old customs are no longer followed because we do not have land to bury the body, and most of us now go to church. (Kajiado Widow 034)

This shift reflects changing attitudes toward widowhood rites, particularly in urban and peri-urban settings where land scarcity and religious conversion are reshaping burial practices.

The findings indicate that seclusion during the mourning period was not common among Maasai widows. Instead, experiences of isolation were more closely linked to stigma and marginalization, rather than formal ritual practices.

One widow from Kajiado narrated: “Widows are treated differently from other members of the community and are often neglected.” (Widow 024. Kajiado).

The account of the widow reveals a deep social exclusion that widows experience within the community. Being “treated differently” signals a marked separation from normative social participation, where widows become invisible or sidelined. This neglect contributes to emotional isolation and weakens their social capital, which is critical for support in times of hardship.

Widows are much more likely to experience food insecurity when they are socially isolated, especially after the death of a spouse. Decreased social support, less desire to cook, and the possibility of losing income or access to necessary resources are all contributing factors.

4.2.3 The distribution of property after death

Widows reported that property distribution following a husband's death often favored male relatives in both the Bukusu and Maasai communities, leaving them without access to land, farming tools, or income-generating assets.

Their capacity to grow food or support themselves is directly affected by this exclusion, which frequently forces them to engage in subsistence farming or land rental agreements. Widows' food security is further compromised by their frequent marginalisation in important socioeconomic decisions, as noted by Dube (2022).

These customs burden widows physically, emotionally, and spiritually despite being presented as cultural duties, highlighting how strongly gendered grief and resource access are in these contexts.

4.2.4 Slaughtering of animals for cleansing.

Slaughtering of animals for cleansing or festivities during death and burial was reported across both communities. One widow in Kajiado explained:
Before burial, a sheep was slaughtered, and we were given milk and fat to drink. His first wife smeared his body with oil, and he was laid on a special cow skin, dressed in his special robe, ready for burial. (Widow 030, Kajiado).

In Webuye yet another widow narrated:
They wanted me to bring a cow for slaughter, but I could not afford it so they isolated me. In our culture, the cow is more than just an animal, it’s a symbol of honour, of belonging. But I had nothing. No livestock to offer, no wealth to prove my place. The isolation meant I had no help, no support, no shared meals. I had to fend for myself while mourning. And in a time when food was already scarce, being cut off made survival even harder. (Widow 004, Webuye).

Among both the Bukusu and Maasai communities of Kenya, the slaughtering of animals during death and burial rituals carries deep cultural and spiritual significance, rooted in ancestral veneration, purification, and communal solidarity.

As documented by Obare (2019) among the Bukusu, this ritual serves several symbolic purposes including:

1. Honouring the deceased: The act is seen as a tribute to the departed and a way to venerate ancestors.
2. Spiritual cleansing: It helps purify the bereaved family and facilitate the transition of the deceased into the world of the living dead.
3. Healing from grief: These rituals are considered native methods of psychological healing, helping the community cope with loss.
4. Cultural identity: The ritual reinforces Bukusu heritage and continuity of traditional beliefs despite modern influences.

Vincent (2024) explores the history and cultural traditions of the Maasai tribe and explains that, cattle are sacred and central to life. Slaughtering animals during death-related ceremonies reflects:

1. Spiritual connection: Cattle are viewed as gifts from Enkai (God), and their sacrifice symbolizes a return to the divine.
2. Communal unity: The meat is shared among mourners, reinforcing social bonds and collective mourning.
3. Ritual purification: The act may be part of cleansing rites to protect the living from spiritual impurity associated with death.

4. Status and respect: Slaughtering a cow or bull during burial signifies honour and respect for the deceased, especially elders.

From a food security perspective, slaughtering of animals for cleansing or festivities associated with death can deplete household assets. Loss of productive animals reduces long-term food sources (milk, meat, manure) and income potential. For example: A widow may be left with no livestock post-funeral, undermining her ability to feed children or farm effectively.

4.2.5 Convergence of Results

The findings from widows in the Bukusu and Maasai communities align with broader scholarly observations on gendered inheritance practices and their implications for food security.

Rituals surrounding widowhood in both Bukusu and Maasai cultures serve not only symbolic and spiritual functions but also shape communal responses to grief and identity. However, as Dube (2023) notes, these practices often extend into mechanisms of social control, with economic consequences for widows particularly through the depletion of household assets vital for food security. Viewed through a Symbolic Interactionist lens, such rituals encode meanings of impurity, danger, and social transition (Miroslav, 2023).

A broad consensus exists among scholars that patriarchal norms embedded in customary systems systematically exclude widows from inheriting land and productive assets. Makanga (2022), Boosuuro (2021), and the CNM Museum (n.d.) highlight how inheritance practices favour male relatives, leaving widows economically vulnerable. Akinola (2018) and Doss et al. (2017) further argue that despite legal reforms, cultural resistance and structural inequalities continue to undermine women's land rights and agricultural autonomy. This exclusion has direct implications for food security, as evidenced by Korir et al. (2021) and Wabwoba et al. (2016), who show that female-headed households face greater risks of food shortages due to limited access to land and inputs. In addition, Adeyemo (2016), and Akinyi (2023) emphasize that widows often lack legal awareness and face social stigma, which isolates them from community support and exacerbates their vulnerability. While most authors agree on the adverse effects of gendered inheritance, some such Kaoga et al. (2021) stress the importance of cultural transformation from within, suggesting that evolving values may offer pathways for reform.

Ultimately, scholars diverge on the strategies for change: some advocate for legal reform (Gitahi, 2025; Constitution of Kenya, 2010), while others emphasize community sensitization and cultural engagement. Together, these perspectives highlight the need for integrated policy responses that address both structural and cultural barriers to widows' access to land and food security.

4.3 Social Expectations on Remarriage

Widows navigated complex social expectations regarding remarriage and inheritance. In the Bukusu community, remarriage, often through levirate, is expected, with consequences for those who resist.

4.3.1 Remarriage Expectations Among the Bukusu

Among the Widows in Webuye, one widow explained: In our Bukusu community, remarriage is a complicated matter. Widows are often expected to be inherited by a male relative of the late husband, usually a brother or close kin (....). There is pressure from the in-laws, and if you refuse, they may become hostile, even taking away your land or property. (Widow 004, Webuye).

Refusal to comply often led to social and material exclusion. The expectation is for younger widows to remarry within the family.

One widow remarked:
"If you refuse, they make life very difficult, sometimes even threatening to take away the little land or property you have." (Widow 009, Webuye).

Another widow recounted:
Once my husband died, I stopped being seen as a person with rights. I became something to be passed on or sent away… If you don't accept to be inherited, you should leave the home. If you do not agree to be

inherited, you do not get any family property, or it is only given to you through the male children that you have. (Widow 011, Webuye).

Yet another widow narrated:
"I refused to remarry my brother-in-law and from that time things changed, and he does not like my children." (Widow 015, Webuye).

The experiences above show that resisting widow inheritance among the widows in the Bukusu community had profound implications for food security, especially in contexts where land, labour, and livelihood are tightly bound to patriarchal structures. Additionally, the findings reveal that the cultural pressure to remarry within the family was not about my well-being but about control over property and family lineage.

Several studies have documented how in many traditional settings, land ownership and access are mediated through male relatives hence, widows who refuse to be inherited may be denied access to their late husband's land or home. (Ajiboye, 2016; Munala et al., 2022). Consequently, without land, these widows may be unable to farm or produce food, leading to dependence that may result in food insecurity.

The findings reveal that widows in the Bukusu community face intense cultural pressure to remarry through levirate, often with limited agency. The findings align with Nyangweso (2017) who contend that in many indigenous African communities, a widow was not only expected to participate in levirate arrangements, she was also required to undergo a cleansing ritual. The findings also reveal that refusal to comply with these expectations can result in social ostracism, emotional trauma, and loss of property or land rights. Widows who resist inheritance are viewed as dishonouring the family, while those without children face heightened marginalization.

4.3.2 Remarriage Expectations Among the Maasai

Among the Maasai, the widows reported mixed observations regarding remarriage and that this depended solely on the family or clan that one came from. To some, remarriage was seen as a taboo hence totally acceptable.

In the words of one widow:
It is very difficult for a widow to remarry and leave her children behind. In fact, remarrying is considered a taboo. A widow is expected to remain in her late husband's home and care for her children. It is viewed as inappropriate to take your children to another man's home after remarrying. (Widow 023, Kajiado).

Another Maasai widow recounted,
It is not good. Why? It is believed that since your husband paid bride-wealth for you, you belong to that family. You are therefore not allowed to get married to another family (Widow 030, Kajiado).

While another recollected her encounter:
I chose not to remarry despite my children still being young," she explained. After I sold some of my cows to support them, family members began to despise me. My co-wife's elder son even took my husband's belongings and gave nothing to my sons because they were still young. (Widow 035, Kajiado).
In the FGD at Esonorua, one of the participants explained that, "Remarrying is considered a taboo." (participant Esonorua FGD, Kajiado).

Another participant in the group stated:
A widow is expected to remain in her late husband's home and care for her children. It is viewed as inappropriate to take your children to another man's home. She is allowed to have children with another man, but the children will carry her late husband's name to continue his lineage. If the widow is young with or without a child, she is not treated well in that family… she may be allowed to return to her biological father's home and bride-wealth may be returned to allow her to remarry. (Participant Esonorua FGD, Kajiado).

Some widows even confirmed that that the custom allowed the widow to continue staying in the home and continuing to get children for their dead husbands.

One widow explained:
In most cases the widow is not expected to remarry as this is considered a taboo in the culture and also so as to maintain peace and avoid conflict among the two families. However, she is allowed to get children for her husband while in the homestead. (Widow 022, Kajiado).

In the Maasai culture, after a husband dies if the wife is still young, she is allowed to get more children with other men outside the family. However, these children will belong to the deceased husband (Balakrishnan et al., n.d.)

To others, remarriage was acceptable as narrated by one widow: “In this community, if the widow is young, she can return back to her father’s home and get married elsewhere.” (Widow 021, Kajiado).

Among the Maasai widows in Kajiado, perspectives on remarriage were deeply shaped by clan-specific norms and beliefs. For many, remarriage was considered taboo, rooted in expectations of loyalty to the late husband’s lineage and the cultural sanctity of bride-wealth. Widows were often expected to remain in their marital homes to raise children, preserving the deceased husband’s name and inheritance lines. These findings reflect the complex and varied cultural logics governing widowhood, shaped by age, motherhood status, and clan traditions.

4.3.3 Convergence of Results

The results show that levirate practices among the Bukusu and posthumous lineage practices among the Maasai constrain widows’ bodily autonomy. This finding supports Ajiboye (2016) and Munala et al. (2022) who describe inheritance customs as forms of gender commodification. One widow observed, “I became something to be passed on or sent away,” illustrating how widows are stripped of agency.

Resisting cultural practices can lead to loss of access to land and property and without land or productive assets, it has been shown that widows struggle to grow food or generate income, leading to dependence and hunger. These findings align with Ba - an et al. (2022) who contend that women are highly depended on men economically and when the man dies, the practice of widow inheritance serves as the only mechanism that ensures that the family continues to be taken care of.
As seen in both communities, inherited widows may retain access to livestock, land, and income streams while, those who resist may be denied inheritance rights or face legal and cultural barriers to claiming property. This economic vulnerability leads to reduced purchasing power and subsequent food security for the widows.

4.4 Sexual Cleansing after Death
Sexual cleansing was also reported. This is the practice in which a widow is required to participate in sexual practices to "purify" herself following the death of her husband. It is extremely detrimental and can be closely linked to food insecurity. One widow explained, “Before the 40 days of mourning ended, I had to find a stranger and sleep with him, so I could be cleansed and remarry.” (Widow 003, Webuye).

Another widow from Webuye narrated:
I was told that I had to sleep with a man from far away, where no one knew me, to exorcise the bad omen of death hovering over me, before I could be remarried. This deeply affected me emotionally, spiritually, and economically. I felt stripped of my independence and identity. (Widow 011, Webuye).

Among the Maasai, sexual cleansing after death was not reported. However, the findings revealed that a Maasai widow was allowed to remain in her husband’s home and continue to bear children who would assume his name.

One widow from Kajiado explained:
If a man dies and the widow is young, whether or not she has children, her in-laws frequently treat her poorly. Sometimes she is returned to her father's home, and the dowry is given back to her late husband's family so she might remarry. Even if she has children, her brothers-in-law may evict her, forcing her to return to her biological family and start over. (Widow 027, Kajiado).

The practice of sexual cleaning, is extremely detrimental and can be closely linked to food insecurity. It exposes widows to sexually transmitted infections, such as HIV/AIDS (Akinyi, 2023), which limits their physical ability to cultivate, trade, or manage household food production activities.

The ritual also generates psychological pain and social withdrawal, which may hinder decision-making and decrease involvement in food-related activities. It is both a violation of human rights and a structural

impediment to food security, perpetuating cycles of poverty, isolation, and hunger (Perez et al., 2015).

4.5 The influence of Religion

Interestingly, not all the widows underwent these practices.

One widow in Webuye attested:
"Since I was married into a Christian family, they do not support the issue of remarriage, and so I was not subjected to the culture of inheritance." (Widow 010, Webuye).

Some widows even confirmed that that the custom allowed the widow to continue staying in the home and continuing to get children for their dead husbands.

One widow explained:
In most cases the widow is not expected to remarry as this is considered a taboo in the culture and also so as to maintain peace and avoid conflict among the two families. However, she is allowed to get children for her husband while in the homestead. (Widow 022, Kajiado).

In the Maasai culture, after a husband dies if the wife is still young, she is allowed to get more children with other men outside the family. However, these children will belong to the deceased husband as explains Balakrishnan et al. (n.d.).

4.6 Stigma and Social Isolation

In conversations with widows from both Webuye West and Kajiado West, a recurring theme was the intense stigma and social isolation experienced after their husbands' deaths. Their narratives revealed how widowhood marked a transition not just in marital status, but in social identity; often to one of invisibility, suspicion, or even spiritual danger.

One widow described the sudden shift in how she was perceived within her community:

Since my husband passed away, life has changed completely. I am often left out of gatherings or conversations. It is like the moment I became a widow; I became invisible and unwanted. (Widow 009, Webuye).

Yest another described her encounter:
I was isolated and shunned by my family members because my husband died of HIV/AIDS. So, nobody talked about me being inherited and it worked out in my favour (....) When you are alone in this community, you are regarded very lowly, no one values you. (Widow 013, Webuye).

One widow from Webuye vividly articulated the depth of rejection and suspicion she faced in her community after losing her husband. She narrated:

Since I became a widow, I have experienced a lot of social stigma and rejection within my community. People treat me differently, not with sympathy, but with suspicion and fear. The women fear and say that I will take their husbands away from them. People (other community members) would rather I did not attend their functions (such as weddings, child naming ceremonies) for fear of bringing bad luck. (Widow 011, Webuye).

These whispered accusations and unspoken tensions left the widows emotionally wounded and socially alienated. Stigma was further fuelled by assumptions about her intentions in interacting with married individuals. Rejection extended even to communal events, where her presence was perceived as undesirable.

In Kajiado, a widow recounted how her refusal to be inherited led to economic and residential insecurity and withdrawal:

"I faced eviction when I refused to be inherited, and my children were not allowed to inherit my late husband's land." (Widow 022, Kajiado).

Another widow reaffirmed the loneliness that comes with stigma and isolation. She explained:
Widows are treated differently from other members of the community and are often neglected. Even married women avoid associating with them, fearing that a widow might attract or take away their husbands (Widow 04, Kajiado)

The findings reveal that widows frequently experience social stigma and exclusion. which undermines their social networks and support systems that are key resources for achieving household food security. Their words speak to the social erasure widows encounter, where their presence is acknowledged but their personhood dismissed.

These findings align with Akinola (2018) who contends that gender inequalities, in terms of land ownership and rights, jeopardize attempts at agricultural productivity and sustainable development for women in Africa.

The consequences for food security are that reduced social capital means fewer opportunities for food sharing, borrowing, or cooperative farming. Additionally, the findings concur with those of Niles et al. (2021) who suggests that multiple scales of social capital, both within and outside the household are correlated with household food security.

4.7 Community and Social Support

Despite prevailing challenges, a few widows reported experiences of community or institutional support that contributed to their resilience. However, the majority described a near-total absence of social protection and support systems. Elders, religious institutions, and widow networks occasionally provided emotional consolation or symbolic assistance, but access to consistent material support remained limited.

One widow in Webuye narrated the stark absence of assistance: “I have not received any social support - none at all. No one has come to check on me (....). I feel forgotten by the community and government.” (Widow 001, Webuye). This experience reflects the systemic marginalization of widows documented by UN Women (2021) and Dube (2023), where state welfare programs either fail to reach widows or apply exclusionary criteria. From a Social Systems Theory perspective (Akahori, 2021), this signifies a breakdown in community and institutional networks expected to provide care.

Another widow shared the emotional and social burden of widowhood, linking her exclusion to stigmatizing beliefs:

Since I became a widow, there has not been much support for people like me. There are a few women’s groups here, but most require regular contributions, and sometimes I do not even have enough to feed my family, let alone contribute. (….) Being a widow comes with a lot of stigmas. People look at you differently. Some think that you are cursed, others believe you must have done something wrong to lose your husband. (….) I go without food because I do not know who to turn to. (Widow 009, Webuye).

This account illustrates how Symbolic Interactionism (Miroslav, 2023) shapes social responses to widowhood. The widow’s identity, socially constructed and stigmatized, influences her access to social capital and support. Literature also echoes that stigma, silence, and moral suspicion often lead to social withdrawal and material deprivation (Adeyemo, 2016; Munala et al, 2022). These symbolic exclusions limit widows’ ability to participate in collective support structures or benefit from public assistance.
Widows in Kajiado expressed similar sentiments, with one stating, “There is any social support system for widows in this area.” (Widow 030, Kajiado). Another widow agreed, “There is no social support” (Widow 033, Kajiado).

Echoing Momanyi et al. (2021), these findings reveal that widows in Kajiado are often left out of economic empowerment programs, which is indicative of larger trends of marginalisation weak or inadequate support networks. Form an Empowerment Theory perspective, Batuwitage (2014) explains that true empowerment necessitates meaningful participation in decision-making and access to resources, both of which are absent in this situation.

Where support was reported, it was often isolated or limited to faith-based spaces. One respondent noted, “Except for the church which provides comfort to the widows, I do not know of any other.” (Widow 004, Webuye).

Such support, while valuable, remained largely psychosocial and not sustained through material aid.

African feminist critiques argue that spiritual or symbolic support alone fails to address the structural injustices widows face (Dube, 2023).

In Kajiado, one widow stated, "There is a church in this community that occasionally distributes goats to support widows, but I have not personally benefited from this assistance." (Widow 024, Kajiado).

This illustrates the fragmented and unequal distribution of support, where eligibility or visibility within the community may determine access. Such cases highlight what Social Systems Theory describes as a lack of interconnectivity and responsiveness within local support systems (Gibson, 2024).

4.8 Effects on Household Food Security

A Household Food Insecurity Experience Scale (HFIES) score was administered to the widows and the results reinforce the qualitative insights by revealing high levels of chronic food deprivation. The results show that 74.2% of all widows (n=35) across both counties reported severe food insecurity (scores 7–8), with no respondent falling in the "food secure" category. In Webuye, 70% (n=20) of widows were severely food insecure, while in Kajiado West Sub-County this figure rose to 80% (n-15). These findings confirm that food insecurity among widows is both pervasive and acute.

These HFIES results validate the lived experiences narrated by widows, including accounts of skipped meals, inadequate access to food, and the inability to recover economically due to cultural constraints. For instance, one widow narrated: "There are days where I go without food because I do not know who to turn to." (Widow 009, Webuye).

This alignment between quantitative findings and qualitative narratives reflects the multifaceted dimensions of widowhood-related deprivation. It confirms prior research linking cultural expectations, disinheritance, and gendered poverty to food insecurity among widows (Dillon & Voena, 2018; Adeyemo, 2016; Momanyi et al., 2021). It also mirrors broader national patterns of food insecurity and exclusion from productive resources (Korir et al., 2021; Wabwoba et al., 2016).

Overall, both the HFIES data and interview findings reveal that widowhood practices, whether through enforced mourning, ceremonial costs, or social exclusion significantly undermine widows' food security. These findings reinforce calls for context-sensitive interventions that protect cultural identity while mitigating the economic harm widowhood rituals impose on women's livelihoods and dignity (Munala et al., 2022; UN Women, 2021). However, the overall trend remains consistent: Widowhood practices function as structural barriers to food security.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the profound influence of socio-cultural widowhood practices on the lives of widows in Bungoma and Kajiado counties, Kenya. Culturally sanctioned rituals such as sexual cleansing, shaving of hair, seclusion and expectations around remarriage of widows often reinforce patriarchal norms that marginalise widows. These practices, though intended to preserve social order, can perpetuate harm, particularly when they restrict women's autonomy, expose them to exploitation, or undermine their dignity.

Religious institutions especially Christian churches play a dual role. While some have implicitly upheld traditional customs, others offer redemptive alternatives rooted in compassion and inclusion.

Widowhood is closely linked to household food insecurity, especially when accompanied by disinheritance or exclusion from productive resources such as land. Without legal protection or family support, many widows struggle to maintain consistent food supplies for their households.

The stigma attached to widowhood and the resultant social isolation further limit their access to communal support, markets and labour networks which are critical for food production and livelihood resilience.
Inheritance challenges such as land grabbing by in laws or denial or property rights worsen vulnerability particularly for widows who choose not to remarry or resist traditional rites. Remarriage where culturally accepted is often conditional and reinforces male

authority, limiting widows' freedom to make independent decisions about their futures.

Overall, the study underscores the urgent need for integrated, culturally sensitive interventions that uphold widows' rights, promote inclusive religious engagement, and ensure equitable access to land, resources and food systems. Addressing these intersecting challenges is essential to advancing widows' dignity, agency, and household food security.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the findings, this study proposes a set of targeted interventions to address the socio-economic and cultural challenges widows face in relation to land access and food security. The first recommendation is to make inheritance rights more enforceable by setting up county-level widow inheritance rights desks in important institutions and holding quarterly legal aid clinics. These are strategic steps to quickly and measurably reduce the number of unresolved land claims.

It is also recommended that a deliberate effort be made to include widows when targeting groups to receive Government and Partner food support and Agricultural subsidy programmes across counties.

To address harmful cultural practices, the study suggests organisation of monthly community dialogues involving elders, religious leaders, and youth. These engagements should be accompanied by attitudinal surveys and aim to reach 80% of villages in the designated study areas.

The expansion of faith-based and psychosocial support is also proposed. This could be achieved by training religious leaders in trauma-informed care and establishing widow support groups within a given timeframe, thereby promoting emotional resilience and social inclusion.

Finally, the study recommends that widowhood be centred in policy and research frameworks. This may include advocating for the inclusion of widowhood indicators in national surveys, publishing policy briefs and peer-reviewed articles, and convening a national widowhood policy forum in the near future. These proposals offer a structured and context-sensitive approach to enhancing widows' dignity, autonomy, and food sovereignty.

Further research is recommended to examine the evolution of widowhood in urban contexts and to explore their long-term intergenerational effects on widow-headed households.

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