

# IN SEARCH FOR A NEW IDENTITY AFTER SPOUSAL DEATH: THE DESIRE TO REMARRY AMONG YOUNG WIDOWS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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## Abstract

The study aims to understand the desire of young widows in South Africa to remarry again after the loss of their spouse. These young widows lose their husband at very early stage of their lives and are faced with the challenges of raising their children alone. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 young widows, no more than a year after their husbands' deaths. They participate in the interview process to share the search for an identity after the spousal death. Data was analysed by using thematic content analysis. Their responses mainly highlighted their desire to remarry and escape poverty. The thematic analysis indicated that remarrying was influenced by age, sexual desire, financial pressure, companionship, and community pressure. The widows find it very difficult to find a perfect match, as many men of their age group are already married. They find themselves dating married men. This is as a result of the shortage of men of their age group. Four major themes emerged from the interviews, namely age of the widow, financial support, companionship, and if ostracised by the community. The findings of the study revealed that there is a strong desire for young widows to remarry, and this desire is met with many obstacles they must overcome along the way. The study recommends that men must be gender sensitive when dating widows; they are human too and need to be treated with respect.

**Keywords:** young widows, financial support, support, companionship, ostracised by the community.

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## 1. Introduction

The study aims to understand the desire of young widows in South Africa to remarry again after the loss of their spouses. A young widow is defined as those younger than 45 years [1]. With an estimate 285 million widows worldwide, over 115 million of them live in deep poverty, in fragile conditions, and are vulnerable to abuse [2]. They are referred to by the UN as 'invisible women' [3] due to the inadequate information on their condition. Regardless of the age of widows, they experience the same problem of adverse health effects, financial insecurities, and the burden of raising children alone [1].

The loss of a partner has a negative economic decline and physical well-being for a young widow. It endangers the support of young widows by their partners, remarriage provides an alternative to mitigate such support [4]. In addition to grieving their husbands, the young widows are also frustrated by their shattered dreams and hopes [1, 5]. In comparison with older widows, young widows have been identified as experiencing a higher level of loneliness [6]. More particularly, widows below 40 years of age, who are still in the market to be considered for remarriage, are still doubtful of whether remarriage will provide happiness and security [7]. The expression and desire to remarry may be influenced mainly by widows who do not have children from their previous marriage.

The age of a widow is a meditated factor in their choice of remarriage, more particularly, with younger women of childbearing age, who are more likely to remarry [8]. Because when a spouse dies at young age, it is associated with many negative outcomes, young widows and widowers represent a vulnerable group. More particularly, the loss of a partner who guarantee the satisfaction of their sexual desires, as they will be seen as a potential threat to other women's relationships [8]. They are negatively stereotyped as women who seduced the husbands of other women [9, 10]. Being younger than 45 years of age at widowhood is the age, used by researchers as the cut off for a young widow [10]. Widows experience a life of alienation and exclusion from community festivals and religious gatherings [6].

The death of a husband means the family has been deprived of a source of income, which results in increased economic hardship [11]. The remarriage is seen as an alternative to mitigate the

loss and bring back the quality of life for a widow. Research showed that very vulnerable widows constantly express the desire to remarry, hoping to receive some help [11]. The pressure to provide children, the stress, accompanied with single parenting, and increased financial strain can increase the widows' desire for remarriage among the widowed [12]. The children can also act as a barrier.

In the marriage market, widows have fewer opportunities for finding a suitable spouse than the unmarried. The probability of marriage (or cohabitation) depends on the supply of available members of the opposite sex [13]. This works exactly like the economics law of supply and demand. When there are fewer men in the market, the potential of remarriage is low. The relative shortage of men on the marriage market translates into a steep gender difference in the probability of re-partnering after widowhood.

Widows will opt not to enter into a new romantic relationship, more so, if the available men do not meet their standards. Some widows opt to cohabite, fearing to get married again. Marriage involves risk, and if a partner dies, the new partner inherits half of the estate [14]. Furthermore, marriage requires commitment, which some widowers are not prepared to sign for it. On the contrary, some people enter into relationships with the hope of marriage one day.

The purpose of the study was to outline the challenges widows face, while deciding whether to get married after their spouses pass away.

## 2. Materials and Methods

IPA methodology encourages participants to describe and reflect on their experience, and several IPA researchers have considered metaphor as a source of rich description and meaning [15]. IPA is more concerned with individual perspectives by examining convergence and divergence within and across cases of participants [15], [16].

### Participants and setting

The study was carried out early in 2022. The respondents were ten young widows who were conveniently sampled. Their widowhood ranges from 1 to 12 years and they have not remarried again. They were all Sesotho speaking. The participants had no variants and chose to remain single.

### Data collection and procedure

The respondents completed a semi-structured in-depth interview regarding their desire to remarry. They described their desire to remarry after the death of their spouses as a means to satisfy their biological needs and gain more respect from the community. The attention and consistency of the applied research procedures are critical to the credibility and transferability of this qualitative study [17]. As a result, a researcher must be "thorough, meticulous, and honest in carrying out the research, as well as be able to show others that you were" [18].

### Ethical clearance Procedure

The ethics was approved by the University's Humanities Research Ethics and Innovation Committee on 07/10/2021, number 01/06/16. The participants willingly consented to participate in the research. The researcher made it clear to the participants that they were participating in the study voluntarily, and that they were free to withdraw at any time. Furthermore, they were guaranteed that they would remain anonymous, and that the information would be kept private. Interviews were conducted with the participants at their homes.

### Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and were analysed [19, 20] for the purpose of firstly becoming familiar with the text, then it identified possible themes, grouping of themes, refinement and clustering of themes, cross case analysis, identifying superordinate themes, labelling of superordinate themes, and writing of a narrative report. The researchers approached the material with an open mind and immersed themselves in it, which was consistent with their approach to data collecting. The case was at the heart of the investigation, and the researchers tried to learn as much as they could about each one before going on to the next. During the cross-case analysis step, the researchers stayed true to the individual case, concentrating on each participant's lifeworld, while looking for commonalities or meaning convergences. The topics that emerged from the conversations were confirmed by the researchers. Following a careful review of the findings, the following

part clarifies the theoretical and practical components of the IPA approach and procedure. The eight participants shared in-depth, colourful, and rich details regarding their personal experiences with co-dependency in their lives.

### 3. Result

The data analysis resulted in five themes: age of the widow, sexual desire, financial support, companionship, and community pressure. The findings are presented and discussed below.

#### Theme 1: Age of the widow

Age of the widows has an effect on widows' decision to remarry. Some of the widows' husbands passed away before they could start a family, and the woman wants to have children. The widows feel that the absence of a man in their lives has robbed them of a quality life. They express these feeling like this:

*"When he passed away, we did not have children of our own in that marriage, I also wanted to bear children like any other women. I was still young and wanted to have a man of my own, to go out with him and have fun. To be taken care of and be spoilt sometimes. My life situation now demanded I live my life, have fun but I do not have a partner. I wish and pray someone come to my life too." Respondent No. 5*

*"When my husband passed away, I was 25 years old and that time I thought I will not marry again. My husband passed away within one year of marriage and did not have a child. I was miserable for two years and felt that at least if I can meet a man who will marry me and start a family I will agree. The disadvantage is that many of them who express love are married, I do not meet either a widowed like me or a divorce at least to consider marrying me." Respondent No. 7*

*"At the age of 30, if I do not remarry, I am going to spend the rest of my life miserable and do not want that to happen to me. When the children are old to have their own life and gone my life is going to be very lonely. Then I start looking for a partner it will be too late, I won't be attractive anymore." Respondent No. 4*

Furthermore, dating for young widows and eventually committing to marriage by their boy-friends is limited by:

*"Many men of my age group are taken. I found myself dating three different men within a year because they were all married that's why I left them. It is not ideal for a woman to change men, but I am human being too who has desire, you find yourself trapped with married men." Respondent No. 9*

*"I am dating a man whose wife lives far away and comes month end he is nowhere to be found you will see him when he from home very broken. I see this man only use me for free accommodation and meals during the month." Respondent No. 4*

*"I am still very young and attractive but men do not want to commit, they come and go. Another man complained that I am making unrealistic demands. I was in the relationship with the guy for five years and he was saying nothing about marriage and remember I do not remain young forever." Respondent No. 1*

The age of the widow thus contributes to the chance of widows who are 45 years and younger for remarriage [21]. Most of them were young and were still looking forward to married life. The death has left a void in their lives that could only be filled by a man. It against this background that widows strongly believed that remarriage would alleviate their plight.

#### Theme 2: Sexual desire

Widows' sexual needs need to be satisfied by a man. The need can be troublesome for widows, due to the absence of the man in her life. The need is described by widows as follows:

*"I told myself I am done with men. Forgetting that I am still young and have sexual desire too. After three years I felt the call of nature I missed a man in my life, I too wanted a man who will take care of me." Respondent No. 2*

*“At first, I was still mourning, and you think you will cope alone but as time passes by you fill that emptiness. Not necessarily you want a man for sex although is important but someone to talk to, share your successes and problem.” Respondent No. 6*

*“I am human being too I have needs to satisfy and the only person who can do this is a man. I feel empty without a man in my life. I have more desire to marry again because that will let me settle and forget about my misery and constant mourning of a dead man.” Respondent No. 10*

The expression of remarriage of young widows is driven mainly by sexual desire and the economic situation. For young widows, biological needs as well as a need for companionship contribute as well. The importance of marriage to them is a means to contain female sexuality and allow its expression within a controlled domain. Because there is no man to control her sexual desire, the loss of a husband simultaneously identifies the widow as sexually lacking, as well as potentially sexually subversive with a lower morale.

In addition to this:

*“I found out that married men see us as easy prey, because they do not want commitment, we are ideal for extra marital affairs. I realised that they think we are desperate and always looking for a man. I think is better if one finds one for herself, but it is not easy.” Respondent No. 7*

*“I have needs also like most women of my age but dating again is a challenge because one has to date a man in my house. He does fulfill the needs but he is not committed. He may leave anytime and I back at square one again.” Respondent No. 2*

In one of the communities, a married woman stated bluntly:

*“Widows have more sexual desire than married women, which is why we have to keep an eye on them, not to steal our husbands.” Respondent No. 6*

*“The community do not understand that it is not ideal for us to change men but they come to our lives and they leave and life moves on. We do not have control over this men some of them are married but conceal it to us, when people who know him thinks that we are prostitute, steal another women’s husbands.” Respondent No. 3*

*“I found difficult to balance my life and kids moreover when I had to choose my happiness over them. Because every time I move with my life they asked me about the previous boyfriend. At one particular I felt I must give up on dating with the hope of finding a man.” Respondent No. 8*

In various communities it is assumed, that widows are desperate for sex and will do anything to entice even married men. The widow’s sexuality is always under scrutiny, especially when there is no man to control it. She becomes a constant threat to married women, as many women are suspicious that they might take their husbands. Given that men tend to take advantage of them, they will date and leave them. These acts traumatise the kids, as they see a different father every time their mother gets a new boyfriend. Again, a woman who changes men frequently are seen negatively in the community and branded as bitches, thus losing the respect of the community.

Theme 3: Financial support

The sudden death of the breadwinner in the household leaves behind a void that cannot easily be filled. Remarriage can provide some solutions to the demands of the everyday life. The words of a surviving widow reinforce this:

*“My late husband passed away he left me behind with three young children, the eldest 6 years, second born 4 years and third born was two years. I received only R40000 from employer’s husband provident fund and expected to pay children school fees, pay rent, buy food, pay municipality rates and taxes. It was damn difficult for me to survive. I looked around that I must raise these children with a minimal salary I receive surely I need a partner to assist me.” Respondent No. 10*

*“I cannot cope with the lifestyle my late husband’s. I am forced to cut some of the necessity, such as disposing some of the expensive cars and find something cheaper but also to keep me on the road is going to be a problem. I would be better off if I can find a working man to marry me at least we will have a joint income, which is better to afford the entire family.” Respondent No. 4*

*“My finances are starting to be depleted after 5 years since he passed away. My responsibilities are huge because I have to pay children’s school fees and transport, with limited salary I receive monthly I have to argument it with husband payout.” Respondent No. 5*

The death of a spouse brings along financial difficulties for widows, and widows are now deprived of a regular income from their husbands [22]. The added responsibility to take care of children becomes an extra burden to their lives, thus increases the desire to remarry [23].

The children appeared as a motivating factor in widows’ decision to remarry. In addition, the strong need for companionship played a role as well, perhaps especially for those widowed at a young age. Widows with children fear for the future of their children without an income to sustain them. Despite these sufferings, they have to take the responsibility and are obligated to raise their children [22].

#### Theme 4: Companionship

The loss of a husband can mean a loss of a friendship to a widow that could not be filled easily. This leaves one very miserable, and in some instances, depressed for not having a companion on her side to share with. In their own words they said:

*“I missed a company of a partner, there is a strong need to opt either to commit or cohabiting. Which ever come first I will take it with both hands. I could not stand to be miserable the rest of my life. It is either a stay alone and became miserable or have a partner to enjoy life at its fullest.” Respondent No. 1*

*“I am always on the edge a small thing always agitates me. I find myself difficult to talk to colleagues because I used to be alone listening to radio or watching television all by myself. We did not have kids with late husband.” Respondent No. 7*

*“Since my husband passed away, I felt that I need someone to share my problems with, at least someone who can listen to me.” Respondent No. 4*

The decision to marry for other widows is pushed by the need for companionship, and the need for friendship, thus breaking from the life of loneness. This has nothing to do with seeking financial support. In addition to the loss of companionship, age and community pressure are also contributing factors.

*“I was new in the marriage, we have just started living together when he died. He left me without even a child. I wish he left me with a child at least, now I miss him and no one to console me even a child.” Respondent No. 3*

The young widows who do not have children find themselves very lonely. They lament on the loss of opportunity of having a man to like a woman of her age. The loneness contributes heavily on their stress levels, and this too affects the quality of their lives.

#### Theme 5: Community pressure

Widows, just like any other woman, would date a man before she commits herself, but the controlling behaviour of the community can discourage this:

“The young women who are married they see a threat with potential to take their husband. This and other factors make you to look for a man of you own.” Respondent No. 9

*“When you attend an occasion, you dress to kill. I do not attend parties and gatherings anymore. You hear this woman gossiping around you ‘what does think, which man she catches, the men in this occasion are taken. With my man I will kill her I cannot believe she has the guts to hunt for a man’. Now I do not have to dress beautifully because I am a widow.” Respondent No. 7*

A life of a widow is always under constant scrutiny from the community, it is expected that she leads a life of a saint. The in-laws expect a widow to be faithful to her late husband and not get married again. The decision to remarry is seen as betrayal to him, moreover when the new husband is not from the family of the deceased husband.

#### 4. Discussion

The findings of this study further emphasise the challenges, faced by young widows whether to remarry after the spousal death. The result of the study is confirmed by literature on young widows, who shared similar experiences in the phenomenon of young widowhood. The age of a widow is associated with the desire of the widow to remarry. Being widowed at a young age puts a lot of pressure on her sexual desire. Some studies argue that financial loss may also have an effect on widows' desire to remarry. The relationship between remarriage and financial resources is significant or marginally significant.

The first was the loss of social identity, found in our study that had similarities with previous research on young widows, which represents this loss or change of identity, following the death of the spouse [24]. Furthermore, the results are confirmed by the theory of remarriage, where the supply of older single males is comparatively lower than the supply of older single females, the rate of remarriage will be lower for widows, thus, resulting in lower remarriages among widows. Widows described increased responsibility, changes to identity, and struggles, associated with sole parenting [24]. Widowhood is more likely to cause financial difficulties for women than men. The death of a spouse means that the nucleus of the family is destroyed, and widows are now deprived of their husband's income, which increases economic hardship [22]. Widows feel sadness, unhappiness, pessimism, and fear of the future, especially if they have children and a limited income [25]. Moreover, they suffer from the social constraints in their relationship with others. Despite of these sufferings, they have to take the responsibility and are obligated to their children.

At the same time, they are often coping with diminished financial resources, increased responsibility in the home, and significant changes to workforce participation [26]. It is known, that the death of one or both parents has a social and economic impact on the lives of their minor children. The findings of the need for companionship are confirmed by the study, carried out by [6], that loneliness affects a widow's livelihood. Widows who cohabitate in South Africa, sometimes occupy precarious positions within their communities. The community pressure for the widow to live a life of a saint also puts a lot of strain on young widows to seek to remarry.

The advantages and disadvantages of the results of the study

The results of the study shed more light on understanding the plight of widows. The widows view marriage as a ticket to escape poverty and an opportunity to live a more normal life. Their interpretation of marriage is completely out of context, as they marry to escape their problems. The study also shows challenges of finding a suitable partner after the death of their spouses.

Study limitations

The sample was small and results could not be generalised. The views, expressed in the study, are of only one population group, and as such it does not give a complete picture. Only Sotho

speaking widows formed part of the study, thus neglecting other African groups. In addition, only widows were considered, which makes the study gender biased.

#### Future research

Future research should consider widows' stress, which may be more strongly affected by the unfulfilled desire for a relationship. Future research should also include other population groups and wider range of characteristics that may assist in making an informed decision on desire to remarry, such as health, loneliness, and networks and family support of the in-laws.

### 5. Conclusion

The desire of a young widow to remarry after the loss of her spouse was investigated in this paper. It brought to light the urge to remarry that was imposed upon them by their circumstances. The study found that a widow's existence is perceived as abnormal without a husband, which is one of the elements that drive widows to remarry. A widow's life is always on the lookout; she cannot date because it's considered promiscuous, despite her biological urges. Furthermore, a widow's desire to find a husband is fuelled by the financial constraints of raising children on a limited budget. As a result, the study indicates that widowhood remains an important component of indigenous cultural life, as most indigenous people still regard it as the only right and acceptable method to mourn a deceased spouse. One of the most difficult decisions they have to make in their lives is whether or not to remarry.

### Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in relation to this paper, as well as the published research results, including the financial aspects of conducting the research, obtaining and using its results, as well as any non-financial personal relationships.

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