

## Self-Esteem as A social Effect of Widowhood in Meru County, Kenya: Comparative Study of Widows and Widowers

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### Abstract

*Widowhood is a state of losing a spouse through death and has been on the increase in Kenya and all over the world. A spouse's death may affect the widowed persons' social well-being, as they go through the various stages of bereavement. They may become withdrawn and isolated which may affect their self-esteem. There may be adverse effects of widowhood that are social since the widowed persons may rate themselves low after the death of the spouse whom they shared life with. In Meru community, no research has been done on the social effects of widowhood yet widowhood is a common phenomenon in the community. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to determine the social effects by comparing widowed men and women in Meru County Kenya. A literature gap exists in Kenya on self-esteem of widowed men and women thus motivating the authors to come up with such a study. Therefore, the objective of this study was to determine self-esteem as a social effect of widowhood by comparing widowed men and women in Meru County Kenya. Ex post facto's causal-comparative research design was considered appropriate for the study because of comparison of groups. Samples of 384 widowed persons (192 widows and 192 widowers) in four Districts were purposively selected making a total of 384 respondents. Data was collected by use of questionnaires which were administered to widowed persons and two Focus Group Discussions for widowed persons were held in each of the four selected Districts; one for the widowers and another for widows. Data analysis was done by use of descriptive and inferential statistics. Inferential statistics included t-test which was used to establish whether differences in self-esteem as a social effect existed between widowed men and women. Descriptive statistics that included frequencies, means and percentages were also used. The findings revealed variations in the widowed persons' self-esteem as a social effect of widowhood where widows showed lower self-esteem than widowers. From the findings, it is evident that absence of either of the spouse negatively affects the self-value of the living spouse especially widows. Counselling programmes of widowed persons in the country are needed to assist and empower them especially widows who are not allowed to remarry. It is therefore recommended that the Ministry of gender, religious organisations, service providers and other stakeholders should use such programmes to address social needs of widowed persons. Finally, the findings will assist the widowed men and women to cope better socially with their state of widowhood as they attach meaning in life and bring up their families single handedly.*

**Key words:** Social effect, widowed person, living spouse, widowhood, Self esteem

### Introduction

Self-esteem is a term used in psychology which reflects a person's overall evaluation or appraisal of his or her own worth (Santrock, 2003). Self-esteem encompasses beliefs and emotions. Behaviors may reflect self-esteem for example, assertiveness, shyness and confidence. Psychologists usually regard self-esteem as an enduring personality characteristic, though normal, short-term variations occur. Self-esteem is a concept of personality and for it to grow, one need to have self-worth.

This self-worth will be sought from embracing challenges that result in the showing of success. Men and women suffer a lot when their spouses become sick and die through many causes. The surviving spouse, now a widow or widower, faces many challenges in coming to terms with a life without their friend and partner. Often the widower experience is examined in light of similarities and differences between them and their female counterparts that affect their self-esteem (Ntozi, 1997). Maslow (2003) included self-esteem in his hierarchy of needs theory. He described two different forms of esteem, the need for respect from others and the need for self-respect or inner self-esteem. Respect from others entails recognition, acceptance, status, and appreciation, and is believed to be more fragile and easily lost than inner self-esteem. According to Maslow, without the fulfillment of the self-esteem need, individuals will be driven to seek it and unable to grow and obtain self-actualization.

### ***Research Problem***

The death of a spouse is a moment of devastation and sadness due to loss of love, care, company and livelihood, accompanied by a feeling of abandonment. It represents not simply the departure of a friend and sometimes a breadwinner, but also results in a radical change in one's social status, lifestyle and behaviours. This may affect the widowed persons' social lives in the way they relate with others, think, behave and express emotions. In the Meru community of Kenya, the attempt to create normalcy after the death of a spouse by embracing specific coping mechanisms has ramifications that create challenges which need serious attention. Issues of death are generally emotive and the situation is made worse when the process of re-adjustment to the new scenario created by bereavement is controlled by pre-defined cultural forces that view women as weaker beings than men. For instance, the widows are perceived by the Meru community to be weak beings naturally including their emotions and morals as they become the head of families with no husbands to depend on.

Such people may develop a feeling that they are not supported by the community and relatives hence low self-esteem. It is even worsened when the in-laws disown the widows in the struggle for inheritance unlike in the case of widowers leading to low self-esteem. However, in the case where widowed men engage themselves in housework activities, men might be more socially affected. Studies on effects of widowhood on social-economic statuses have been done in Western countries and others on widowhood rites and rights of women in Uganda and Nigeria in Africa. In Kenya studies have been done on widowhood in the era of HIV/AIDS in Siaya and Kisumu. However, there is no research that has been done on social effects of widowhood in Kenya, specifically Meru County. Therefore, the study attempts to establish the social effects of widowhood by comparing widowed men and women in the Meru County of Kenya.

### ***Methodology of Research***

#### ***General Background of Research***

This chapter presents a description of research design, location of the study, population of the study, sample size and sampling procedures, instruments, data collection and data analysis procedures.

#### ***Research Design***

*Ex post facto's* causal-comparative research design was utilized because two groups of widowed persons (widows and widowers) were compared in order to determine self-esteem as a social effect of widowhood. The study was carried out in Meru County of Kenya.

#### ***Sample of Research***

The researcher used simple random sampling technique to select four districts from the eight districts in Meru County, Kenya. According to Ogula (1998), a sample size of 384 respondents is acceptable for a descriptive research with a population of 100,000.

In this study, the target population was 80,332 and therefore a sample size of 384 was deemed appropriate. Out of the 384 widowed persons that were selected, 192 were widows and 192 were widowers who were purposively selected. From this number, 48 widowed men and 48 widowed women were sampled in each District by use of purposive sampling technique.

#### ***Instrument and Procedures***

The study utilized questionnaires and Focus Group Discussions to collect data from the respondents. The items in the questionnaires were open and closed-ended.

Furthermore, Focus Group Discussions helped to capture the in-depth information by probing further on social issues that affected widowhood persons. The issues raised were recorded in a recording list for reference and in order to assist the researcher in data analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

Self esteem as a social effect of widowhood was explored to establish whether differences exist in the value widowed men and women attach to their lives. The data that was collected from the questionnaires and Focus Group Discussions was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics including frequencies and percentages was used and inferential statistics included the t-test to compare means of widows and widowers in Meru County, Kenya. Mugenda and Mugenda (1999) notes that t-test is an ideal statistical tool when comparing the means of two groups. Self-esteem as a social effect was established and compared in widowed men and women. The significance level was set at  $\alpha=0.05$  and Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 17 was employed in the entry and analysis of data. According to Borg (1996) SPSS is the commonly used set of computer programme in social science research. The programme is comprehensive, integrated collection of computer programmes for managing, analysis and displaying data. The results of the data were presented in summary using frequency tables, bar graphs and pie charts that enhanced clarity and brevity. Furthermore, from the Focus Group Discussions, some excerpts giving the responses of widowed men and women were presented in themes and summaries. These were very useful because they gave more in-depth information about the social effects of widowed persons.

### **Results of the Research**

#### *Comparison of Self-esteem of Widows and Widowers*

Self-esteem is a concept of personality and for it to grow; widowed persons need to have self-worth. This self-worth is sought from embracing challenges that result in the showing of success in their undertakings. Widows and widowers suffer a lot when their spouses become sick and pass away or die through many causes. Coping with the loss of a spouse is often one of the difficult challenges in life, whether the spouse dies in middle age, old age or somewhere in between. The surviving spouse, now a widow or widower, faces many challenges in coming to terms with a life without their friend and partner. Often the widower experience is examined in light of similarities and differences between them and their female counterparts that affect their self-esteem. The widowed persons' state of widowhood affected their self-esteem differently as presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Comparison of Self-esteem of Widows and Widowers**

Category	Mean	SD	t-value	Df	p-value
Widows' self esteem	3.675	1.684	29.384*	1	0.000
Widowers' self esteem	3.53	1.45			

\*denotes significance at  $\alpha = 0.05$  level

An inspection of the results in Table 1 indicates that some mean differences in self-esteem existed between widows and widowers. The mean self-esteem for widows was 3.675 whereas that for widowers was 0.145 points lower than that of widowers at 3.53. The deviations from the mean for widows is 1.684 and for widowers is 1.45. This implies that widows had lower esteem than widowers. However, this finding was not sufficient to make a conclusion on the stated hypothesis. Therefore, a look at the mean scores and standard deviations (S.Ds) provided substantive difference, which the t-test value would either corroborate or falsify. The obtained t-value ( $t=29.384$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ) is indicative of statistically significant differences in self-esteem between widows and widowers. In view of these findings, the hypothesis ( $H_{01}$ ) suggesting that there is no statistically significant difference of self-esteem as a social effect of widowhood on widowed men and women in Meru Country was therefore rejected.

According to Table 1, widows had lower self-esteem, an indication that they find it hard to build their self-value after the death of their husbands. This is where they play both roles of the father and mother that is challenging hence low self-esteem. On the contrary more widowed men had average self-esteem or high self-esteem an indication that men persevered all challenges of life better than widowed women according to the Meru community cultural orientation despite the loss of their wives. However, the study findings revealed that more widowed women had low self-esteem than widowed men. Montpetit *et al* (2006) suggested that many older adults adjust well to loss and report high levels of well-being.

Other researchers have highlighted the fact that decreases in self-esteem are not a universal experience of widows (Fry, 2001, Blackburn, Greenberg & Joss, 1992; Digiulio, 1989). Fry (2001) found that self-efficacy beliefs had an impact on self-esteem whereby strong self-efficacy beliefs related to higher levels of self-esteem. This indicates that there are other factors that may impact self-esteem in widows beyond their experiences of spousal loss. (Blackburn *et al*, 1987) concluded that drops in self-esteem were not a part of the typical grieving process, and therefore, may certainly not be experienced by all widows.

To get a better representation of the responses the Focus Group Discussions were used on widowed men and women where widows scored higher than widowers in low self-esteem. The women's responses tended to relate to the idea of low self-esteem. A predominant way that the participants attached value to themselves varied with gender. The following is an excerpt relating to responses given on self-esteem by widowed men and women.

### **Excerpt 1.**

**Researcher:** What value do you attach to yourself and how do you rate yourself compared to others including widowed men and women in the community? (Probe to know if there are negative or positive self-value statements that widowed persons give about their lives.)

**Jane (Widow):** Initially I had a lot of value for myself, family and work but this changed when I lost my husband last year. People around me take me as a person of no value. I find it very different with my neighbor who is also a widower like me since she progresses on like before when she had the husband.

**Joseph (Widower):** I have faith in my own abilities and value myself. I feel very well when I do things especially when I have the necessary resources like money. I can do very well in life like other men since it was God's plan to take away my wife which pains me much.

**Mary (Widow):** I think I am confident in my ability to do things adequately and appropriately though others perceive me as being too proud especially my in-laws. There is nothing as bad as losing a loved one and later getting opposition from his own people and of same blood.

**Jacob (Widower):** I think I have confidence in my ability to do things adequately and appropriately without external force. That is being a true African man and after all life must continue even without my lovely wife.

**Monica (Widow):** I think I like myself and have faith in my own abilities although I feel low most of the times when I remember my husband who died three years ago. If he was alive I would be as happy as other women. Sometimes I lack meaning to live when my children lacks school fees.

**Jeremiah (Widower):** Yes, I have confidence in my ability to do things adequately and appropriately as per the societal expectations. However, if my wife was alive I would be even better. I am feeling good about myself and I am okay the way I am since I am in my home. But to the widowed woman she may feel out of place with the death of spouse since she is usually a new member of the family. I feel I have much higher self-esteem today than when I lost my wife through an illness.

**Sarah (Widow):** According to my own experience, widowed men are better than women. Widows are faced with more problems than widowers which makes them to feel of low value especially with in-laws' negative perception about them. Just feeling good about oneself but with unknown forces, I feel vulnerable to many things but widowed men could be better than me since they are in their clans and homes where they get support.

**Peter (Widower):** Since I was used to leaving our home under the care of my wife I found the new life a bit hard. This is because my job requires me to be away most of the time I felt very low at first and that is why I remarried after five months.

From the excerpt, it is evident that the self-esteem differences existed based on gender. Many participants acknowledged that differences existed in self-esteem based on gender where ideas of feeling low among widowed men and women were featured. It is noted that widowed men and women who had happy marriages before the death of the spouses' recorded low self-esteem. Those who lacked marital happiness recorded average or low self-esteem altogether. It is noted that there are differences in self-esteem of widowed men and women which was in favour of widowed men. Jeremiah's statement suggests that self-esteem does not have to be connected to an accomplishment or an extraordinary achievement. It can be inferred from his statement that self-esteem might relate to an inherent sense of self-worth to widowed persons differentially. Given the changing landscape of widowhood and the new encounters with grief and loneliness, it is easy to presume that widows' attitude of confidence and positivity would decrease. Some participants mentioned the difficulty of being a widow and wished their husbands were alive.

Fry (2001) suggested that loss of self-esteem during widowhood may occur through a variety of pathways. Loss of a meaningful spouse role, loss of significant relationships with the deceased's associates, and increased physical and social isolation have all been implicated as pathways by which self-esteem may be eroded during widowhood (Arens, 1982; Ferraro, 1984). Widows may be further being vulnerable to lowered self-esteem as a result of diminished economic resources and dependency (Fry, 2001). Other studies in the gerontological literature have suggested that self-esteem drops during widowhood as a result of lowered emotional efficacy (Carr *et al*, 2006; Lund, *et al*, 1993).

### Conclusions

The study findings revealed that widowhood influenced the widowed men and women self-esteem. Specifically, widowed women showed lower levels of self-esteem and Widowed men on the other side, recorded high self-esteem. For the widowed women, this may be due to lack of in-laws support especially through discrimination, issues of property inheritance, denial and rejection as major problems of widowed women.

### Recommendation

The Government through the Ministry of Gender and social services as well as service providers including social workers, religious leaders, NGO's and donors, need to identify and understand the social needs of widowed persons owing to the challenges of widowhood. This may help to boost the widowed persons' self-esteem as they bring up their children singlehandedly.

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