

Revealing the Untold Stories: Documenting the Experiences of Marginalised Widows within the Church Leadership of Black Reformed Churches in Limpopo, South Africa

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Abstract

Widows within the Black Reformed Church in South Africa often find themselves marginalised, their voices disregarded, and their opportunities for leadership roles restricted. This study aims to delve into the hidden narratives of widows facing marginalisation within the Black Reformed churches in Limpopo, South Africa, utilising qualitative research methodologies. The study further aims to investigate the firsthand encounters and difficulties that widows encounter within the framework of their religious community and suggest ways that Reformed churches should implement to improve their assistance and facilitation. Widows are a minority within Limpopo's Black Reformed churches. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, ensuring that a wide range of demographics is represented. This included widows from various age groups, socio-economic origins, and faith affiliations. Data collection was carried out with cultural sensitivity, giving priority to the perspectives and experiences of widows through their oral stories while also ensuring that ethical considerations are maintained. Participants' consent was obtained before conducting interviews and conversations. The data was analysed using thematic analysis to find recurring patterns, motifs, and narratives. The research seeks to develop a thorough comprehension of the experiences of widows in the Black Reformed churches in Limpopo by consistently comparing and interpreting data. This research is significant in

UNISA 

Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae

2025 | #18378 | 20 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/2412-4265/18378>

ISSN 2412-4265 (Online), ISSN 1017-0499 (Print)

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developing future policies of the church on the importance of the general inclusion of widows in the church leadership.

Keywords: marginalised widows; reformed churches; Limpopo, South Africa; church leadership

Introduction

The Synod of Soutpansberg founded the Black Reformed Churches in South Africa (RCSA) in 1963. Since its inception, this denomination has not officially addressed the involvement of women in ecclesiastical positions. Historically, the denomination has marginalised widows and other female groups from leadership roles, including reverend, elder, and deacon. Despite recent advancements, including women's active participation in worship services and church councils, their lack of presence in legally recognised positions persists, highlighting enduring structural and theological constraints. Widows remain a marginalised group within the faith communities today despite the role and the potential they possess. Additionally, the issues around widowhood and their experiences in the church remain unexplored. The lack of widows who occupy leadership positions in the church is of great concern. This study seeks to document the experiences of marginalised widows within the Reformed Churches of South Africa (RCSA), focusing on the barriers to leadership positions, the support systems put in place for them, and their involvement in the decision-making structures of the church. The insights of this research can lead to identifying trends in widowhood treatment that are not specifically unique to RCSA but are widespread within church institutions in Africa. This can also lead to the facilitation of a collective response with applicable practical solutions by churches providing inclusive pastoral care across African contexts.

Literature Review

The marginalisation of widows within religious frameworks, especially in South Africa's Black Reformed Churches, illustrates a significant intersection of cultural, theological, and sociopolitical factors. The scant research on widows' experiences inside religious groups reveals systemic inequalities that restrict their involvement in leadership and decision-making positions. This study employs studies on gender and theology, African ecclesiastical traditions, and broader frameworks of marginalisation to elucidate the context and importance of incorporating widows into church leadership.

Marginalisation and Widowhood in African Contexts

In African societies, widows often experience distinct forms of marginalisation resulting from cultural, economic, and social factors. Research, including Nadar's (2009), Siwila's (2015,61–62) and Kotzé et al. (2012,742), underscores the persistence of patriarchal norms that perpetuate gender disparities, relegating widows to subordinate positions within both familial and communal contexts. Theological interpretations often

promote these practices within churches, constraining women's roles. Research on widowhood in Limpopo underscores the intersection of culture and religion, wherein the responsibilities of widows are often confined to caregiving and supportive roles rather than leadership (Mshweshwe 2018). African feminist study indicates that cultural stigmas associated with widowhood, including notions of impurity and dependency, intensify this marginalisation (Thabede 2020,11). These viewpoints underscore the necessity of inclusive ecclesiastical policies that acknowledge widows' contributions and empower them to assume leadership roles.

Gender and Leadership in the Black Reformed Churches

The marginalisation of women, especially widows, from leadership roles in South Africa's Black Reformed Churches is grounded in historical and theological foundations. Maluleke (1997) critiques the entrenched sexism among African Reformed traditions, which perpetuates male-dominated structures despite significant contributions from women to church activities. The ongoing marginalisation of widows reflects broader trends in African churches, where gender equity is often regarded as subordinate to theological fidelity (Plaatjies van Huffel, Mary-Anne 2019,1–2 and Landman 2017,363).

Cultural and Policy Implications

Cultural and theological reforms are crucial for confronting the marginalisation of widows in African churches. Kengjise (2024) asserts that the importance of governmental attempts to formalise the participation of widows in leadership positions is a critical issue. The African Union's Agenda 2063 and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals promote gender parity and inclusive governance, potentially offering frameworks for ecclesiastical reform.

Churches in Limpopo and across South Africa must establish policies that acknowledge the contributions of widows and promote their involvement in decision-making bodies. Effective solutions encompass targeted leadership training initiatives for widows, the establishment of support networks, and the integration of widow-centric concerns into ecclesiastical governance.

Theoretical Framework

This research is grounded in the African Womanist Theory, which highlights the lived experiences, agency, and empowerment of African women within their sociocultural and historical contexts. The study centres on the African Womanist perspective, seeking to tackle issues of gender equity, inclusivity, and the redefinition of women's roles in leadership and decision-making, especially within ecclesiastical and communal settings. This theory provides a framework for critically analysing and deconstructing patriarchal structures while advocating for reinstating women's rightful positions in society and the church. Oredein (2023,161) states that Womanist ideology directly confronts the

realities of genuine African women and promotes their involvement in leadership positions. This theology acknowledges the cultural and theological significance of widowhood in African societies and advocates for a theology of widow leadership and participation in church life. The focus is on communal values and the opportunity to redefine leadership concepts within church environments, recognising the significance of widows' voices in influencing church policies, while acknowledging how African women exemplify resilience and spirituality through the principles of African Womanist Theory.

Pan-African Perspectives on Widowhood

The experiences of widows across Africa reveal complex patterns of marginalisation that transcend denominational boundaries. Potash (1986,44) asserts that foundational research of widows in numerous African tribes reveals that widowhood rites usually reflect deeper cultural views about gender, power, and social hierarchy. These conventions vary significantly across the continent, but they typically have the effect of limiting widows' autonomy and leadership opportunities. According to Sossou (2002,201), widowhood represents a "social death" for women in many African societies, where women's identities and social status are primarily determined by their relationships with men.

Korang-Okrah and Haight (2015,318) investigate how widows in Ghana overcome cultural norms that impede their economic and social freedom. Their findings reveal that even within supportive religious communities, widows experience "dual marginalisation"—first, due to the loss of spousal status, and second, due to cultural limits that prevent them from participating in communal leadership. This perspective expands our understanding of how widows in Black Reformed Churches may confront similar structural constraints, despite doctrinal differences.

Theological Perspectives on African Widowhood

Oduyoye's (2001,78) groundbreaking research on African women's theology offers critical insights into the dialogue between Christian theology and indigenous religious frameworks regarding widowhood. She asserts that "African traditional religions frequently depict widows as spiritually vulnerable yet potentially formidable," which leads to complex dynamics when these concepts intersect with Christian theological interpretations of widowhood. This ambivalence, which involves the perception of widows as both potent and weak, presents obstacles to their integration into leadership structures within religious communities.

Pastoral concern is frequently presented as condescending charity rather than releasing inclusion in some African churches, as Amoah and Oduyoye (1988,42) assert that "the Bible's emphasis on care for widows has been selectively applied." With respect to the status of widows in church hierarchies across a variety of denominations, this selected biblical interpretation has a substantial influence.

Intersectionality and African Widowhood

Tamale (2020,56) employs intersectional analysis to demonstrate the various forms of marginalisation that African widows experience in relation to their gender, marital status, age, and socioeconomic status. Her research in Uganda suggests that “religious institutions frequently perpetuate rather than contest these interlocking oppressions,” despite doctrinal commitments to equality and justice. This intersectional approach elucidates the diverse ways in which widows in the Black Reformed Churches may experience marginalisation as a result of factors that are not inherent to their status as widows.

Chitando and Chirongoma (2012,129) extend this concept by examining the influence of HIV/AIDS on widowhood in Africa, which has led to the development of new forms of stigma and exclusion that religious institutions are unable to effectively address. Their research demonstrates that “conventional views of widowhood intersect with modern health issues, resulting in novel forms of marginalisation” that require innovative theological solutions.

Theological Ethics and Widow Inclusion

Kaunda (2016,193) advocates for an African feminist theological ethics that places widows’ experiences at the centre of theological study. He claims that “a truly Christian society should be measured by its care of its most vulnerable members,” and that including widows is a theological imperative, not a social option. This ethical paradigm offers a valuable viewpoint on church operations, notably the participation of widows in leadership positions.

Kanyoro (2002,76) expands on this ethical framework, suggesting that “cultural hermeneutics” should influence the interpretation of biblical teachings about widowhood in African churches. She argues that “uncritical acceptance of either traditional African rites or Western theological readings of widows poorly represents the actual lives of African women,” hence she advocates for contextually relevant theological approaches that stress widows’ voices and experiences.

According to Feminist Theology, Critical Race Theory (CRT), Intersectional Theory, Postcolonial Theory, and African Womanist Theory, widows in Limpopo’s Black Reformed Churches face numerous forms of marginalisation. Feminist theology criticises patriarchal norms that hinder widows from taking active leadership roles in the church, asking for equal involvement of both genders. Critical Race Theory (CRT) examines the social and economic restrictions that contribute to these women’s marginalisation, focusing on the oppression they face at the intersection of race, gender, and widowhood. This study looks into the interplay and cumulative characteristics of these oppressions, which are based on race, marital status, and class, all key components of intersectional theory and contribute to increased extra-legal marginalisation of

widows. The African Womanist perspective emphasises African widows' resilience and spiritual significance, asking the church to recognise women as culturally embedded and effective leaders. This provides a solid theoretical foundation for understanding and improving church practices that allow widows to carry out their appropriate roles within the church community.

Research Methods

Research Paradigm, Approach and Design

The present study employs the anti-positivist technique to examine the marginalisation of widows, who constitute a minority within the Black Reformed churches of Limpopo. This approach utilises qualitative research methodologies, specifically interviews and observations, to acquire a more profound comprehension of the distinct obstacles encountered by widows within this particular cultural and religious environment. The study concentrates on how conventional beliefs and practices lead to the exclusion and discrimination of marginalised individuals within the church community by analysing their experiences and views. The study provides guidance on how to tackle these problems and enhance inclusivity and assistance for widows in the Black Reformed churches of Limpopo.

The rationale for employing anti-positivism in examining the marginalisation of widows within the Black Reformed churches is crucial since it enables a more profound comprehension of the social and cultural elements involved. By dismissing the notion that social phenomena can be evaluated and researched objectively without any bias, researchers can consider the subjective experiences and viewpoints of widows themselves. This methodology allows for a more sophisticated examination of power relations, prejudice, and alienation inside these religious groups, ultimately resulting in more efficient tactics for confronting and countering marginalisation Garner and Selod (2015,11). The study employs qualitative research methods to investigate the process of uncovering the concealed stories of widows who experience marginalisation within the Black Reformed churches in Limpopo. It explores the firsthand experiences and challenges that widows face within their religious community and proposes strategies that Reformed churches can adopt to enhance their support and facilitation. This study helps in gaining insight into the distinct obstacles and encounters faced by widows within this specific theological framework, using comprehensive interviews and participant observation. The study amplifies the voices of marginalised individuals and provides valuable insights to enhance the creation of more efficient support systems in the Black Reformed churches in Limpopo. The study potentially brings about concrete modifications that could have a beneficial effect on the lives of widows and enhance their general welfare within their religious community.

Population and Sampling

The study focuses on documenting the experiences of marginalised widows within the church leadership of Black Reformed Churches in Limpopo, South Africa. The study's sample consists of widows between the ages of 35 and 60, who are not now in positions of leadership in Black Reformed Churches in Limpopo Province, South Africa. The study employed a purposive sample strategy to choose individuals who could offer in-depth and comprehensive insights into their experiences. The sample size was set by saturation, guaranteeing the inclusion of a wide range of opinions. Church networks and community outreach programmes were actively seeking out participation, ensuring a wide range of widows from different backgrounds and experiences were included. Semi-structured interviews were utilised to facilitate participants in expressing their narratives using their own language, enabling a more profound comprehension of the obstacles and successes they have encountered in their roles as church leaders.

Research Context and Approach

The study used observation as one of its research methods, together with individual interviews and focus groups, to capture the experiences of impoverished widows in Black Reformed Church leadership in Limpopo, South Africa. Sathiyaseelan (2015,57) reviews research equipment and concludes that observation is an appropriate strategy for collecting qualitative data.

Observational Focus Areas

From the document, the following areas appear to have been observed:

1. Church Community Dynamics

- Patterns of inclusion/exclusion of widows in church activities
- Social interactions between widows and other church members
- Treatment of widows in public church settings
- Physical positioning and spatial arrangements during church gatherings

2. Decision-Making Processes

- Who speaks and who is listened to in church meetings
- How widows' suggestions and inputs are received
- Patterns of leadership selection and participation

- Observable power dynamics in committee structures

3. Support Systems

- Formal and informal support mechanisms for widows
- Differences between stated support and observable actions
- How empathy versus inclusion manifests in observable behaviours

4. Cultural-Religious Intersections

- Observable manifestations of cultural views on widowhood
- How traditional mourning expectations affect participation
- Visual and behavioural signifiers of widow status
- Community responses to widows in religious settings

Evidence from Participant Statements

Participants' statements reflect observations about their treatment and experiences:

1. PTRR 5 observed: "Church council members orchestrated our programmes without considering our input as widows."
2. PTRR 3 noted observational patterns: "I was regarded more as an object of pity rather than being recognised as an engaged participant in the church."
3. A focus group participant observed: "Widows are frequently expected to abstain from social activities and maintain a state of sorrow, which can lead to their isolation from the church community."
4. PTRR 4 indicated observational trends: "I have observed a gradual increase in the church's awareness of the needs of widows... there is currently a greater emphasis on offering emotional support."

Methodological Approach to Observation

The text indicates that the research was executed with cultural sensitivity, emphasising the viewpoints of widows while upholding ethical standards. Participant observation seems to have been utilised to comprehend the social dynamics and structural factors influencing the experiences of widows.

The researchers employed the Tshivenda language for data collection to foster a comfortable atmosphere and enhance the accuracy of information gathering, as stated: "The interview was conducted in Tshivenda due to its suitability for the participants since it has the advantage of increasing the probability of collecting more precise information" (Phamphe 2021).

Analysis of Observational Data

The document indicates that observational data was analysed alongside interview and focus group data using thematic analysis. This process identified recurring patterns related to:

1. Exclusion in Decision-Making and Ecclesiastical Participation
2. Empathetic Care versus Genuine Inclusion
3. Absence of Leadership Opportunities and Distrust
4. Requirement for Organized Support Frameworks and Fair Treatment

Research Instruments

A detailed understanding of the experiences of disadvantaged widows within Black Reformed Churches in Limpopo, South Africa, was achieved by utilising a combination of individual interviews and focus groups as research tools. This method provides a comprehensive examination of the difficulties encountered by these widows, while also offering them an opportunity to express their grievances and propose potential remedies. Furthermore, by actively engaging the widows in the research process, their perspectives and personal encounters can take the spotlight, guaranteeing that the study accurately reflects their actual experiences. In addition, employing various data collection methods aids in triangulating the findings, so bolstering the legitimacy and validity of the research results (Pratt et al. 2022). In general, this combination of individual and focus group methodologies shows significant potential for providing insight into the frequently neglected experiences of marginalised widows within the setting of Black Reformed Churches in Limpopo, South Africa.

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection procedure entails the selection of 10 individuals for individual interviews and a focus group. The first five participants were interviewed individually, and another five people were interviewed as a group of five. The individual interviews and focus group revolve around the topic of revealing the Untold Stories about the experiences of marginalised widows within the church leadership of Black Reformed Churches in Limpopo, South Africa. Conducting individual interviews provides an opportunity to thoroughly examine the specific experiences of each widow who has been marginalised within the church leadership (Moschella 2023). This approach establishes a forum for participants to openly and candidly express their narratives. Conversely, the focus group enabled participants to engage in debate and interaction, so facilitating a more thorough examination of shared themes and experiences among marginalised widows in the church. The integration of various data collection approaches indicated a thorough comprehension of the difficulties and prospects encountered by marginalised widows within Black Reformed Churches in Limpopo, South Africa. Moreover, the integration of focus group discussions provides insight into the specific challenges encountered by marginalised widows inside the church,

ultimately resulting in a more nuanced comprehension of their real-life encounters. Through the establishment of a secure and nurturing setting, the study enables these women to express their narratives, so enhancing their sense of empowerment and increasing the impact of their voices within the community.

Data Treatment and Analysis

Data processing and thematic analysis are critical phases in evaluating the information collected from the study on the experiences of marginalised widows within the church leadership of Black Reformed Churches in Limpopo, South Africa (Shilubane 2019). Due to the participants' vulnerable condition, it is imperative to ensure ethical and sensitive data management. The study was conducted meticulously to ensure its validity and reliability, adhering to the ethical guidelines provided by the Research Ethics and Social Sciences Committee (RESSC) at the University of Venda. The participants' identities were maintained in strict confidence; nonetheless, their true names were concealed by substituting them with fictitious African names. The participants were informed that they had the choice to discontinue their involvement in the interview process and that the researchers would uphold their rights and dignity, guaranteeing their protection from any harm. Thematic analysis facilitates the identification of prevalent themes and patterns within the data, enabling a more profound comprehension of the experiences of marginalised widows within this particular setting (Bristowe et al. 2023). Additionally, this was done to facilitate the extraction of significant conclusions and recommendations for effectively resolving any potential concerns. By handling the data diligently and with consideration, researchers may guarantee that the perspectives of these marginalised widows are acknowledged and their experiences are faithfully portrayed.

Presentation of Main Findings

Thematic Analysis of Individual Interviews and Focus Group

This part offers a comprehensive grasp of the widow's perspective of the Untold Stories and the lived experiences of the black RCSA. The researchers employed a confidential agreement form to guarantee confidentiality and alleviate participants' concerns regarding the anonymity of the interview procedure, thus establishing a favourable environment. The interview was conducted in Tshivenda due to its suitability for the participants since it has the advantage of increasing the probability of collecting more precise information (Phamphe 2021). The researchers, proficient in both English and Tshivenda, translated the questions from English to Tshivenda to ensure precise and effective communication. The researchers employed identical questioning techniques for both individual interviews and focus group, therefore avoiding the need to segregate material while presenting the primary findings. Furthermore, the researchers enhanced the reliability and consistency of the findings by cross-referencing the data obtained from individual interviews with the replies gathered during focus group discussions.

This was achieved by a meticulous comparison of the data and the identification of recurring themes. Moreover, individual interviews frequently uncover comprehensive and intimate perspectives, whereas focus groups emphasise collective experiences and social dynamics. By presenting them together, a comprehensive perspective was achieved, considering both intricate individual perspectives and overarching collective agreement. Moreover, presenting the data collectively facilitates the identification and discussion of any disparities or similarities between private statements and group dynamics, which is essential for comprehending the intricacies of the underlying issues. Follow-up questions were retained due to their inherent benefits in facilitating a more thorough examination of a respondent's first responses (Hsu and Sandford 2019). This enables the discovery of more intricate and subtle information that may remain undisclosed by the primary question alone. They assist in elucidating obscure or equivocal replies, guaranteeing that the gathered data is precise and indicative of the respondent's genuine views or experiences. Moreover, the most significant insights are derived from delving further into an initial answer. Subsequent enquiries have the potential to unveil unforeseen revelations and novel viewpoints that the original query may have failed to encompass (Schein and Schein 2021). The interviewing procedure continued until the researchers reached a level of data saturation, which is a stage in the research process where no additional information or themes emerged from the data. Data was collected through a set of one-on-one interviews with five participants, as well as a group focus group consisting of five participants.

Theme 1: Exclusion in Decision-Making and Ecclesiastical Participation

Asquith and Asquith (2019,27) contend that these two components constitute a robust Bourdieusian framework for elucidating exclusion in decision-making processes within religious contexts: on one hand, his concepts of social and cultural capital. He asserts that inclusion in decision-making systems is frequently determined by power dynamics and social capital. Within the church, this manifests as authority and voice being granted solely to individuals with specific forms of social or cultural capital. This framework offers a valuable perspective for examining how institutional structures may contribute to the marginalisation of disadvantaged populations.

Undervalued and marginalised in the decision-making processes

The experiences of the widows, as articulated by the participants, reflect the exclusion of marginalised groups from church leadership and decision-making roles. This is in line with the scholarly works of Rakoczy (2004,29), who discusses the gendered dynamics of church leadership, particularly the systematic marginalisation of women, including widows, in ecclesiastical structures. The initial participant's sense of being

ignored in decision-making procedures reflects the patriarchal standards common in many religious societies. PTRR 5 states the following:

.....As a bereaved individual in my religious community, I have encountered both assistance and difficulties. Although the congregation has usually been benevolent, I have occasionally experienced a sense of being disregarded in decision-making processes, especially in areas where the insights of widows could provide useful perspectives. There were instances when my proposals for support groups for widows were not given due consideration, causing me to feel excluded and insignificant. The church council members orchestrated our programs without considering our input as widows.

In addition to that, another participant, PTRR1, maintains the following, which is related to the first participant:

My experience as a widow in the church has been characterised by a combination of assistance and seclusion." While I have derived solace from my religious beliefs and the benevolence of certain individuals, there have been instances where I had a sense of exclusion from specific church engagements. During church events, I occasionally experienced exclusion from conversations or decisions pertaining to family-oriented subjects like sex, which resulted in feelings of marginalisation.

Recipient of Compassion

Participant Five's statement about being treated as an object of pity rather than as an active participant echoes Haddad's (2003) analysis of "charity versus justice" in religious communities. Haddad contends that widows and other vulnerable groups are often recipients of pity or charity, which undermines their agency and reinforces their marginalisation. This mirrors the participant's feeling of exclusion despite the outward expressions of compassion. PTRR 3 assert that:

Being a widow, my involvement in the church has been mostly favourable, although not without its challenges." An important challenge I encountered was the presumption that I required charity or sympathy instead of authentic inclusion. Occasionally, this has resulted in unpleasant circumstances where I was regarded more as an object of pity rather than being recognised as an engaged participant in the church, causing me to feel excluded.

Loss of leadership opportunities and a lack of trust

The exclusion from leadership positions owing to widowhood, as well as the concern of being viewed as a threat to married women, as expressed by Participant Five, are consistent with Machingura and Chikwanha's (2019) findings on societal stigmatisation of women, particularly widows. These interactions not only restrict the opportunities of women but also exacerbate systemic disadvantages that undermine the contributions of single or bereaved women. Participant number PTRR 3 maintains:

I was excluded from the position of women's chairman because to my unmarried status, which made me feel alienated and prompted me to consider leaving the church in search of another one." Furthermore, married women perceive us as individuals who harbour intentions of pursuing their spouses, resulting in a lack of confidence towards us.

Restriction on involvement

The limitation on widows' participation in leadership positions is consistent with Oduyoye's (2001) assertion that conventional gender expectations typically preclude African women, particularly widows, from important roles in religious communities. Participant Five stresses the cultural reluctance to involve widows in decision-making processes, highlighting the confluence of gender, culture, and ecclesial participation. PTRR 5 asserts that:

Due to my widowhood, my involvement in church activities, especially in leadership positions, has been somewhat restricted. Although I still participate in religious services and actively participate in certain church groups, I have observed a hesitancy among others to include me in important decision-making processes. Nevertheless, the church has offered solace by means of frequent visits and prayer gatherings, serving as a valuable source of emotional support.

Theme 2: Empathetic Care versus Genuine Inclusion

Benaroyo (2022,329) asserts that the philosophy of the ethics of duty and the other serves as a valuable framework for distinguishing empathetic care from inclusion. Benaroyo contends that an ethical response emerges from the interaction with leading to a significant obligation for their welfare. However, to feign empathy for the struggles of individuals in this country, without taking any substantive action beyond mere discourse constitutes a disservice to fellow human beings involved in this situation. The researchers should apply this to the ecclesiastical domain, indicating that pastoral care must extend beyond mere empathy or polite gestures to encompass what we refer to as actions promoting solidarity and inclusion. The subsequent subthemes are derived from the fourth theme:

Establishment of a formal support group specifically designed for widows

The participants' request for structured support groups is in accordance with Cornwall's (2002) research on the necessity of establishing places for marginalised groups within religious contexts. Cornwall is of the opinion that structured support programmes facilitate the discussion of underprivileged individuals' experiences and the development of coping mechanisms. In this context, the idea of widows' support groups is consistent with a decolonial approach to pastoral care, emphasising emotional and practical support for marginalised people. PTRR 5 states the following:

The church's help for widows might have been enhanced if it had implemented a structured support group. This would have provided me with an opportunity to

communicate my experiences to individuals who comprehended my circumstances, along with receiving practical guidance and emotional encouragement in a more organised setting.

Furthermore, PTRR 3 asserts that:

My church might have enhanced the emotional assistance it provided by establishing specialised grief therapy sessions designed exclusively for widows. These sessions would have been beneficial in navigating the intricate emotions and problems I encountered, equipping me with strategies to manage more efficiently.

Equitable treatment of widows

Rakoczy (2004,30) emphasises the slow but growing recognition of women's participation in ecclesial spaces, echoing the gradual shift towards more equitable treatment of widows. The participants' growing awareness of widows' emotional and spiritual needs in the church indicates a positive trend towards inclusivity, but it is incomplete without their full incorporation into leadership roles. PTRR 3 asserts that:

Throughout the years, I have noticed a noticeable shift in the church's approach towards widows, becoming increasingly welcoming. Recently, there has been a discernible trend towards establishing support groups and arranging targeted activities that recognise the distinct difficulties encountered by widows, a phenomenon that was less prevalent in previous times.

In addition, PTRR 4 states that:

I have observed a gradual increase in the church's awareness of the needs of widows. For instance, there is currently a greater emphasis on offering emotional support, including regular visits and prayer circles, which were less frequent in earlier years.

Mentorship programme and leadership development programme

Chisale (2021) supports the concept of mentorship and leadership programmes for widows, claiming that peer mentoring is an effective way to empower widows within ecclesial communities. These programmes have the potential to transform the landscape of ecclesial life by identifying widows' expertise and experience and establishing them as vital contributors to the spiritual growth of young women in the community. PTRR 4 states the following:

Implementing a mentorship initiative inside Reformed churches, where experienced widows aid recently widowed individuals, would be a highly beneficial undertaking. This form of peer support would offer direction and solace to individuals who are navigating the initial phases of widowhood.

Moreover, PTRR 1:

I am of the opinion that widows will have a crucial role in providing guidance and support to younger women within our churches." Their sagacity and accumulated life experiences will be of immense worth in directing the upcoming generation and moulding a church that esteems inclusion and the contributions of all its members.

Furthermore, PTRR 5 maintains that:

Inclusivity can be improved by church leaders making a deliberate effort to acknowledge the significance of widows in leadership roles. One way to achieve this is by publicly recognising the valuable contributions made by widows and actively promoting their involvement in important church activities. I propose the implementation of a workshop series focused on leadership and empowerment specifically designed for widows. The objective of this program would be to educate widows with the necessary skills and knowledge to assume more prominent roles within the church.

Theme 3: Absence of Leadership Opportunities and Distrust

Scott (2016,34) asserts that subordinated groups may occasionally adopt a clandestine discourse in response to a repressive and restrictive environment, as their suspicion of the ruling or dominating class intensifies. In an ecclesiastical context, the absence of leadership opportunities for some groups can foster a culture of internal resistance and suspicion towards those in power, thereby eroding confidence within the community. The following subthemes are extracted from the fourth theme:

The general community's perception

In her assessment of the treatment of widows in African religious institutions, Panek (2004) explores the concept that widows are weak and in need of pity rather than productive contributors. Widows are usually perceived through the lens of loss, which reduces their autonomy and reinforces their exclusion from leadership roles. Participant Five's remark indicates that widows are often perceived as recipients of charity rather than as active givers. FCG states that:

The perception of our community as vulnerable or in need of pity frequently shapes the way we are treated in the church, where we may be seen more as beneficiaries of charity rather than as engaged participants. This impression can result in the marginalisation of widows from positions of leadership or significant decision-making, as they are perceived as requiring assistance rather than being recognised as competent contributors.

However, FCG asserts that:

As widows, we are often seen by the community as lacking a husband and this perception can impact how we are treated within the church. As a consequence of this impression, widows are frequently disregarded or not given due consideration in church

events and conversations, as they may be perceived as having less influence or importance compared to married members.

Conventional perspectives on the process of grieving

The restriction on widows' involvement in leadership roles fits Oduyoye's (2001) observation that traditional gender roles can marginalise African women, particularly widows, from important roles within religious societies. Participant Five emphasises the junction of gender, culture, and religious participation by stressing the cultural resistance to including widows in decision-making procedures. This investigation examines the extent to which societal attitudes towards widowhood contribute to the isolation and restricted participation of widows in religious activities, and the perspectives of the participants are consistent with the results of the study. PTRR 5 maintains that:

Our treatment as widows in the church is influenced by cultural views that view widowhood as a period of prolonged mourning. Widows are frequently expected to abstain from social activities and maintain a state of sorrow, which can lead to their isolation from the church community and restrict their participation.

In addition, PTRR 4 maintains that:

Widows in my church are greatly impacted by society's expectations that link a woman's value to her position as a wife and mother. When a woman becomes widowed, she may experience a loss of her main sense of self, resulting in reduced esteem and limited chances for involvement in the religious community.

Theme 4: Requirement for Organised Support Frameworks and Fair Treatment

Fraser (2020,70–71) asserts that justice necessitates both an equitable distribution of resources and the acknowledgement of marginalised individuals, together with fair participation in decision-making processes. Ecclesiastical institutions must establish formalised support mechanisms to address systematic disparities and guarantee equitable treatment for all members. The subsequent subthemes are derived from the fourth theme:

Ensuring the future participation of widows in leadership positions

The vision of Participant Four about widows assuming increasingly important leadership roles in the future fits the goals of academics like Phiri (2012), who support women's participation in church leadership. The participant's suggested course of action for leadership development seminars is in line with Phiri's assertion on the need for training courses arming women with the necessary tools to empower them and lead in religious surroundings with efficiency. FCG assert that:

I foresee that widows in my church will assume increasingly prominent leadership positions in the future." Individuals will be perceived not only as members requiring

assistance, but also as resilient and competent individuals who may make substantial contributions to the church's spiritual and community activities.

Conclusions

This qualitative study aimed to outline the experiences of widows regarding exclusion and marginalisation, as well as their lack of participation in decision-making processes within the Black Reformed Churches of South Africa (RCSA). Widows articulated sentiments of marginalisation and undervaluation, occasionally perceiving themselves as objects of pity rather than as significant contributors. These narratives exemplify the interconnectedness of gender, culture, and religion, as traditional customs inhibit widows from participating in church, hence exacerbating their marginalisation. A demand for concrete help, genuine inclusion, and engagement in spiritual and leadership positions arose, emphasising the necessity of transitioning from compassion to active participation within the church. Individual interviews and focus groups gathered both personal and social perspectives, highlighting a fundamental demand for acknowledgement and equitable treatment, along with institutional structures to support and empower widows.

Recommendations

This study has demonstrated exclusionary practices prevalent in the Black RCSA that affect particular social groups, including widows and novices. A comparative analysis of widows across various African religions may elucidate whether the trends identified herein are unique to the Black RCSA or are widespread across African religions and religious institutions. This may illuminate distinctive contextual elements and common issues, facilitating contextually responsive and universally applicable solutions for providing inclusive pastoral care across various African contexts. Research should examine the implementation and evaluation of widow-directed empowerment programmes in houses of worship across Africa. Research should examine the implementation and evaluation of widow-directed empowerment programmes inside places of worship, such as formalised support groups and leadership skills training. Prolonged evaluation of these initiatives' outcomes would assess their efficacy and pinpoint requisite modifications to enhance the inclusion of widows in ecclesiastical leadership. This study could present a viable framework for enduring activities that offer assistance and leadership within religious groups.

A comprehensive analysis of potential modifications to ecclesiastical rules and principles to permit widows' involvement in decision-making and leadership within the church is proposed. This may entail examining the convergence of ecclesiastical doctrines, cultural norms, and the responsibilities of widowers, while also evaluating strategies for policy-oriented initiatives to address systemic marginalisation. Identifying opportunities for policy reform aimed at diversity could significantly influence leadership practices across faiths and enhance widow empowerment.

Further research is recommended to implement the decolonial paradigm in pastoral care practices and to explore how widows, as marginalised individuals, might empower themselves. This method may challenge the prevailing patriarchal and monolithic systems within the church, advocating for a paradigm shift that encourages the church to fundamentally transform and explore new realms for the body of Christ. It may provide a precedent for other marginalised communities, fitting with overarching ideals of social fairness both within and beyond the Black RCSA.

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