

## BEREAVEMENT CHALLENGES OF MIDDLE-AGED CHRISTIAN WIDOWS AND WIDOWERS IN THE EFFUTU MUNICIPALITY OF GHANA

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### ABSTRACT

The study explored the bereavement challenges facing middle-aged Christian widows and widowers in Effutu Municipality. The exploratory two-stage sequential mixed method research approach was used. In the first stage, interviews were conducted with nine (9) participants comprising four (4) middle-aged widows and five (5) middle-aged widowers. The cross-sectional survey design involving a purposively selected sample of 302 participants completed the questionnaire for the second stage. Study participants were married before losing their spouse, middle-aged (between 30 and 55 years), and were members of the ten selected churches with majority of middle aged- widows and widowers exhibiting symptoms of depression (Mean, S.D.=2.43 ±0.91). The results showed that middle-age Christian widows and widowers faced lots of challenges during bereavement and psychological challenge was dominant with symptoms of depression. Their depressed state was due to the fact that the loss of a partner leads to a grief process that is characterized by deep sadness, depressed mood, anxiety, and loneliness (Strobe & Hansson, 1993). The study recommends that counsellors, clinicians, churches, society and family could systematically use the bereavement challenges studied to help widows and widowers cope effectively during bereavement and subsequently improve their mental health and well-being. Government must also invest more in mental health in Ghana by working together with policy makers to formulate and implement policies that seek to eliminate all forms of discrimination against widows and widowers through awareness creation.

**Key Words:** Bereavement, Middle-aged Christian widows, Middle-aged Christian widowers.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Losing a loved one is one of the crucial and most difficult experiences that individuals may cope with during their lifetime no matter how old you are, but may be hardest on people in middle-age. Though most of the studies on loss of a spouse focus on the elderly, psychologists have examined the impact of this event at different points in life. Middle-aged people, are more likely than older or younger widows and widowers to exhibit symptoms of depression and complicated grief (Neimeyer, 2000). According to Neimeyer (2000, p.23), middle-aged, people are at “maximum engagement in the world”. It is a point at which they are most in need of a partner, committed themselves to careers, raising children, having older parents they are responsible for and therefore have a heightened risk of dying in the period immediately following their spouse’s death (Bonnano & Kaltman, 2009). Widowhood by definition means the death of one spouse in the couple.

From time immemorial, death has always been understood as an occurrence befalling mostly the aged. Ghanaians regard the subject a taboo, one which is too weird and morbid to be openly discussed. In Ghana and for that matter, Effutu Municipality, a significant number of middle-aged

have experienced (and still in) widowhood. From informal discussions and exploratory surveys, it is notable, however, that contrary to the erroneous notion that death is primarily associated with old-age, the developing trend now accounting for this condition of widowhood in the recent past was largely precipitated by traditional, political and accompanying armed conflict which more often than not ended in the death of many young men whose young wives consequently have to endure subjection to suffer widowhood. It was gathered from some members of the community that because most spouses suddenly died without any signs of serious illness, there was no time for anticipating grief, and the shock is very intense and painful for the widow or widower. Furthermore, there is no welfare association for the bereaved in the Municipal Assembly helping with social support, financial support and counselling except a few of the churches the researcher explored. Widows in the community complain of facing a lot of issues with their deceased spouse's family and sometimes they are ostracized, humiliated, and denied access to their husband's property since most of them die intestate. This results in many of them facing a lot of economic challenges to the extent that they are unable to provide adequate food, shelter, and clothing for their family.

Widowhood has become a problem in our society. As Jakoby (2012) stated, it is a time that requires the development of alternative patterns of behavior in order for an adjustment to be determined. Studies outside Ghana have focused on losing a spouse at old age, middle-aged, social support, change, and resilience of widows/widowers (Bonanno & Kaltman, 2009; Breen & O'Connor, 2011; Niemeyer & Holland, 2015; Nseir & Larkey, 2013). Studies in Ghana have focused on Bereavement with regard to widowhood rites, socio-economic status, and challenges of bereavement of widows (Korang-Okrah & Haight, 2014; Aborampah, 1999; Amlor & Owusu, 2016). However, it appears there is little literature on bereavement challenges facing widowed middle-aged widows/widowers in Ghana, and most of the studies done are on widows only. This study was therefore intended to fill in the gap for both widows and widowers who have lost their spouses in middle-age through an investigation into the bereavement challenges facing Widowed Middle-aged Christians in the Effutu Municipality?

## **2.REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

### **2.1 Psychological Impact of Widowhood**

Scannell-Desch (2003) found that the loss of a life partner had great adverse impact on wellbeing of widows and widowers. Clayton, Halikas and Maurice (2002) asserted that widowhood was a significantly distressing event in the life of any individual partner who is bereaved as it was associated with psychological ramifications. Strobe and Strobe (2003) added that widows and widowers experienced a high level of depression and trauma that negatively affect their well-being. Similarly, Richardson and Balaswamy (2001) reported the common characteristics experienced by widows and widowers during their first three months of bereavement, such as difficulties in concentration, profuse crying, depression, difficulty in sleeping, lack of appetite, reliance on sleeping pills, loneliness, trauma and shock. Parkes and Weiss (2003) argue that bereavement, grief, and mourning apply to the psychological reactions of those who have experienced the loss of a loved one. Many widows report a range of emotional reactions, including confusion, shock, fear, uncertainty, fury, and low self-esteem (Chen, 2000). Chen (2000) further asserts that for widows, this transitional moment is the beginning of a permanent life of poverty. Widows experience a loss of status and identity as they are often forced to change their living

arrangements and conditions. In addition to the above-mentioned issues widows have to endure, most of them also have to face loneliness and the loss of a breadwinner until they themselves die.

Middle-aged widows have been identified as suffering from more severe grief reactions and lower morale and depression (Nolen-Hoeksema, McBride & Larson, 2007). Bennett (2005) summed up the age predictor in their conclusion by asserting that the middle-aged widowed are at greater risk for health complications and also suffer more emotionally. According to the above, it can be argued that middle-aged widows are incomparably susceptible to difficulties of adaptation to a bereavement in comparison to older women. This argument is drawn from the fact that spousal bereavement in middle-aged is an unexpected event that disrupts the expected course of life and brings stress not normally associated with the stage of life these women are in.

## **2.2 Social Challenges of Widows and Widowers**

The social life and relationship of widows and widowers in their widowhood is a natural behavior of human beings. The relationship is not one way. It is two ways where the widows and widowers influence the environment and the environment vis-à-vis in the process of interaction. The death of a spouse has a negative impact on the system in the general life of the life partner due to the disrupting stability of the lived life. Benkel, Wijk and Molander (2009) noted that the widow or the widower readjusts to a new living environment following the death of the partner. Lee & Sullivan (2001) noted that widows and widowers need social support and self-esteem to cope and survive.

Notably, social support is very important especially when death occurs. A widely shared understanding regarding bereavement is that the quality and availability of social support and intimate attachments are among the most important moderators of grief symptoms (Kahn & Antonucci, 2001; Ben-Zur, 2012). Social support is positively associated with physical and mental health and can buffer the adverse health impacts of stressful life events and chronic strains (Cobb, 2009). Increased physical seclusion, social isolation and reduction in social activities during spousal bereavement have been found to severely distort perceptions of self-worth and self-esteem (Berkman, Brissette & Seeman, 2000). If a widow or widower perceives that support is unavailable or unattainable, that perception can have a profound impact on the coping strategy adopted by the widow or widower in question and may contribute to her inability to adjust to her loss (Cobb, 2009).

## **2.3 Widows Economic Challenges**

Widow's economic challenges, according to Cattell (2003), are the effects of widowhood associated with economic challenges that include the loss of the breadwinner or co-breadwinner. This results in poverty, health challenges associated with poor nutrition, inadequate or no shelter, lack of access to health care, and vulnerability to violence. Hence, participants in Carton's (2003) study shared their experiences of suffering from "mourning fatigue" and becoming "poorer with each burial," because of the number of deaths and the financial burden this brings about. Carr, Nesse and Wortman (2006) indicate how the economic context shapes grieving practices, as many do not have the time to grieve.

As a coping mechanism for widows, grief and loss are pushed aside as people try to find meaningful ways of surviving. In some communities, grieving is construed as a "luxury"

(Bonnano & Kaltman, 2009). Moreover, to worsen their plight the widows are denied access to their husband's piece of land to farm, houses and animals etcetera and they are without a voice in this regard. In the event of them attempting to react, some are beaten up, stigmatized, abused, and ostracized (Burton, Haley & Small, 2006).

### 3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study used Exploratory Sequential Mixed Methods design. This design involves collecting and analyzing the qualitative data in the first phase and using the findings from the qualitative data to either develop an instrument (instrument development model) or to establish essential variables or emergent categories to study quantitatively a particular phenomenon (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The study was undertaken in Winneba in the Effutu Municipality, Central Region of Ghana. The target population comprised all widows and widowers in Effutu Municipality. The accessible population comprised all widows and widowers in the ten selected churches in the Effutu Municipality. A population size of 316 was obtained from the membership data of the ten selected churches comprising 186 widows and 130 widowers.

The number for participants used for the qualitative phase in this study comprised 5 widows and 5 widowers totalling ten (10) participants from ten selected churches in Winneba. However, one of them withdrew and the researcher had to work with only the remaining nine (9) participants. Based on the sample size of the population for each church, the researcher randomly selected five (5) widows from the first five churches and five (5) widowers from the remaining five (5) churches who volunteered to participate. A sample size of 302 comprising 177 widows and 125 widowers, using the Yamane (2009) formula, was obtained for the quantitative phase. Respondents obtained for the qualitative phase were not part of the sample size for the quantitative phase. The selection criteria looked at middle-aged spouses between (30 and 55 years) who were married before losing their spouse and must be members of the ten selected churches. In determining the sample size, Yamane (2009) formula was used. Determination of sample size using the Yamane (2009) formula: [  $n = N / (1 + Ne^2)$  ]

Where N= population size

e = alpha level (0.05)

n= sample size

The sampling method used was purposive followed by simple random sampling. Both purposive and random sampling were combined to produce a powerful way of sampling (Albertin & Nair, 2004). Purposive sampling was used because the researcher used judgement to select the sample based on prior information and provided the data the researcher needed.

Semi-structured interviews and widowhood Challenges Questionnaire were used to access all variables of interest. The Semi-structured interview guide and Widowhood challenges questionnaire were developed by the researcher to determine the challenges middle-aged widows and widowers experienced during bereavement. The questionnaire was designed to measure three challenges namely: psychological, social, and economic, while the interview guide was informed by the objectives, research questions, and the principles of the theoretical framework of the study.

The interviews were conducted in the churches, homes, and offices of these participants. In all, the researcher made ten (10) visits to the settings of the study throughout the period of the data

collection for the qualitative phase. For the quantitative phase, the researcher visited the accessible population personally and handed the questionnaire to the pastors or leaders in charge of the various churches. The researcher explained to them the expectation of the respondents. The questionnaire was administered to the selected respondents who volunteered to participate in the study. Thematic qualitative data analysis was used to analyze qualitative data and data entry. Validation and analysis for the quantitative phase was done using statistical product and services solution software (SPSS version 21). Descriptive statistics were generated for sociodemographic characteristics of the study participants and presented in frequencies, percentages, and mean scores.

**4.RESULTS**

The total number of participants for both the qualitative and quantitative studies were 310. The number of widows was 4 widows and 5 widowers for the qualitative phase while widows numbering 173 (57%) and widowers numbering 128(43%) represented the quantitative phase. Concerning the age of respondents, it was revealed that the majority of respondents were within the age group of 36-45 years numbering 119(40%), followed by those in (46-55) years, numbering 113(37%), while (30-35) years numbering 69(23%) were the least represented. Presenting on Highest Educational Status of respondents, the majority of respondents numbering 104(34%) were found to have had Tertiary education, followed by Secondary school leavers of 69(23%). Ninety-two (31%) had Basic education, while 36(12%) had no schooling background.

**Table 10: Presentation of biodata of respondents**

Biographic Data of Respondents

Items	Frequency	Percent (%)
<b>Status</b>		
Widow	173	57
Widower	128	43
<b>Age</b>		
30-35 years	69	23
36-45 years	119	40
46-55 years	113	37
<b>Highest educational Status</b>		
Tertiary	104	34
Secondary	69	23
Basic	92	31
No school	36	12
<b>Years in widowhood</b>		
Less than 5 years	127	42
Between 5 to 10 years	117	39
11 years and above	57	19

Source: *Field Data, 2019.*

Research question 1, investigated bereavement challenges of middle-aged widows and widowers. The results from the data given by the respondents through a self-reported administered questionnaire captured from sections B-D which are made up of 32 items. The challenges are categorized in three forms namely psychological, social and economic challenges. Consequently, the results were presented in frequency and percentage first to allow a fair idea of the results in specific details. Again, the results from the challenges were put together in their three forms and their mean and standard deviations were presented. In all, 32 items were used to solicit for information in relation to this research question. The result is presented in Table 12 to 14.

The result in Table 11 shows that 11 out of 13 (84.6%) of the psychological challenges were found to be of medium challenge and only 2 out of 13 (15.4%) items were found to be low in magnitude. This explains that majority of middle-aged widows/widowers experienced moderate psychological challenges during bereavement. The results further indicated that *“I am usually not in good spirits most of the time”*, was the psychological challenge that majority of widows/widowers reported and was ranked the highest with a mean of (M=2.43) whiles *“I am unable to handle day to day tasks on my own”* was ranked the lowest with a mean of M=1.86.

**Table 11: Psychological Challenges of Widows and widowers**

Item No.	Statement	Mean	SD.	Rank of Mean	Nature of challenges
8.	I am usually not in good spirits most of the time	2.43	.91	1 <sup>st</sup>	Medium
6.	I often get restless and fidgety	2.34	.92	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Medium
9.	I am uncertain about the future	2.31	.98	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Medium
4.	I easily become upset with uncertainties	2.27	.90	4 <sup>th</sup>	Medium
13.	I am unable to confide in others and lack companionship because I think people don't like me	2.26	.91	5 <sup>th</sup>	Medium
10.	I am unable to go out and socialise easily	2.24	.88	6 <sup>th</sup>	Medium
7.	I keep venting my anger on those who do not deserve to be my target	2.22	.93	7 <sup>th</sup>	Medium
3.	I am easily angered because of things that are outside my control	2.14	.99	8 <sup>th</sup>	Medium
5.	I am unable to deal successfully with my day-to-day problems and annoyances	2.11	.84	10 <sup>th</sup>	Medium
12.	I feel I have been ostracised	2.08	.88	11 <sup>th</sup>	Medium
11.	People no longer greet me or socialise with me	2.01	.90	12 <sup>th</sup>	Medium
2.	I blame myself for being a widow/ widower	1.96	.91	13 <sup>th</sup>	Low
1.	I am unable to handle my day to day tasks on my own	1.86	.87	14 <sup>th</sup>	Low

Source: Field Data, 2019.

Grand Mean=2.17

**Table 12: Social Challenges of Widowhood**

Item No.	Statement	Mean	SD.	Rank of mean	Nature of challenges
13.	My partner’s family have been threatening me over property issues after the demise of my spouse.	2.37	1.03	1 <sup>st</sup>	Medium
11.	I lack people who cheer me up whenever I am sad after the death of my spouse	2.29	.90	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Medium
10.	I cannot count on my friends when I need their assistance after the demise of my spouse.	2.29	.90	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Medium
7.	I am not able to do things accurately as most other people do after the demise of my spouse	2.25	.77	4 <sup>th</sup>	Medium
3.	I feel I do not have much to be proud of after the demise of my spouse	2.23	.92	5 <sup>th</sup>	Medium
1.	I feel unattractive after the demise of my spouse	2.17	.95	6 <sup>th</sup>	Medium
12.	I do not get emotional help and support I need from my family or friends	2.16	.86	7 <sup>th</sup>	Medium
9.	I do not have people to encourage me whenever I am sad after the demise of my spouse.	2.15	.82	8 <sup>th</sup>	Medium
2.	At times I think I am a disappointment to all after the demise of my spouse	2.15	.86	9 <sup>th</sup>	Medium
6.	I always feel uncomfortable around others and scared to socialise	2.14	.81	10 <sup>th</sup>	Medium
5.	I am inclined to feel that I am a failure after the demise of my spouse	2.08	.67	11 <sup>th</sup>	Medium
4.	I struggle with feelings of inferiority after the demise of my partner	2.03	.88	12 <sup>th</sup>	Medium
8.	People no longer greet me after the demise of my spouse.	1.93	.79	12 <sup>th</sup>	Low

Source: Field Data, 2019.

Grand Mean=2.16

The result in Table 12 above shows that 12 out of 13 (92.3%) of the social challenges items were found to be of medium challenge and only 1 out of 13 (7.6%) items was found to be low in its magnitude. This shows that majority of middle-aged widows/widowers experienced moderate social challenge during bereavement. Most respondents were of the view that “My partner’s family have been threatening me over property issues after the demise of my spouse” was ranked the highest mean (M=2.37) whiles “People no longer greet me”, was ranked the lowest. (M=1.93).

**Table 13: Economic Challenges of Widowhood**

Item No.	Statement	Mean	SD.	Rank of Mean	Nature of Challenge
6.	I have in so many ways been placed in an economic disadvantage after the death of my spouse.	2.42	.92	1 <sup>st</sup>	Medium
2.	I am unable to pay my children’s school fees on time because I do not have adequate support.	2.39	.84	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Medium
1.	My financial situation has made it difficult for me to provide my children learning materials and other resources for their education.	2.27	.94	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Medium
4.	I am unable to pay for my rent	2.25	.85	4 <sup>th</sup>	Medium
3.	My children and I are unable to seek good medical care due to financial difficulties.	2.22	.89	5 <sup>th</sup>	Medium
5	I am unable to provide of food, clothing and shelter for my family.	2.16	.87	6 <sup>th</sup>	Medium

Source: Field Data, 2019.

Grand mean= 1.88

The result in Table 13 above shows that 6 out of 6 (100%) of the economic challenge items were found to be of medium challenge. This is indicative that all middle-aged widows/widowers face moderate economic challenges. “*I have in so many ways been placed in an economic disadvantage after the death of my spouse*” was ranked the highest with a mean M=2.42 whiles “*I am unable to provide of food, clothing and shelter for my family*” (M=2.16) was ranked the lowest amongst the economic challenges of middle-aged widows/widowers in Effutu Municipality.

**5.DISCUSSION OF RESULTS**

**5.1 Psychological Challenges**

With regards to psychological challenges, the study showed that majority of middle-aged widows and widowers reported experiencing depression as compared to loneliness and stress. This was also confirmed in the quantitative results where they reported depression as the major psychological challenge. This is evidenced in “*Not being in good spirits most of the time*”, (M=2.43) which was rated the highest mean. This statement is a major symptom of depression. Strobe and Strobe (2003), explicates that widows and widowers experience high level of depression and trauma that negatively affect their well-being. Cognitive theories of depression hypothesize those particular ways of thinking increase an individual’s likelihood of developing and maintaining depression when they experience stressful events. Premised on Beck, Commerford & Reznikoff (2006) asserts that depressed patients have a negative view of



themselves (seeing themselves as worthless, inadequate, unlovable, deficient), their environment (seeing it as overwhelming, filled with obstacles and failure), and their future. This negative way of thinking guides one's perception, interpretations and memory thereby resulting in a negatively biased construal of one's personal world, and ultimately, the development of depressive symptoms. This supports the preceding statement. Depression is an extremely complex disease and occurs for a variety of reasons. Some people experience depression during widowhood. It is a state of low mood and aversion to activity that can affect a person's thoughts, behaviour, feelings, and sense of well-being. People with depressed moods can feel sad, anxious, empty, hopeless, helpless, worthless, guilty, irritable, ashamed, or restless (Brown, 2002).

Middle-aged widows and widowers have been identified as suffering from lower morale (depression) and grief reactions. (Nolen-Hoeksema, Mc Bride & Larson, 2007). It came to light from the study that depression is a major psychological challenge that affected most middle-aged widows and widowers in Effutu Municipality as cited by the various authors above.

### **5.2 Social Challenges**

The qualitative findings revealed that most widows and widowers did not face challenges in relation to their social life. However, the quantitative results revealed that most middle-aged widows and widowers had social challenges with their spouse's family over property issues after the loss. This has resulted in some of their relationships being savoured. This is noticeable from table 12 where  $M=2.37$  was ranked the highest mean among the social challenge items, presupposing that majority of widows and widowers faced social challenges in relation to property issues.

Social functioning is the individual's actions with the environment such as work, social activities, relationships and family. "My partner's family members have been threatening me over property issues after the death of my spouse". To buttress this point, Burton, Haley & Small (2006), asserts that to worsen the plight of widows they are denied access to their husband's piece of land to farm, houses, animals etc., and they are without a voice in this regard and in the event of attempting to react, they are beaten up, stigmatised, abused and ostracised. This social challenges affects the social functioning and self-esteem of these widows.

### **5.3 Economic Challenges**

The qualitative findings revealed that majority of widows and widowers faced economic challenges. This confirms the quantitative findings where all items were above the grand mean which is a clear indication that majority of widows and widowers faced economic challenges and most especially in the area of "being in so many ways placed in an economic disadvantage, after the loss". Catell (2003), explains that the effects of widowhood are associated with economic challenges that include the loss of the breadwinner or co-breadwinner. This results in poverty, health challenges associated with poor nutrition, inadequate shelter, lack of access to health care, and vulnerability to violence. Hence, participants in Carton's (2003) study shared their experiences of suffering from "mourning fatigue" and becoming "poorer with each burial," because of the number of deaths and the financial burden this brings about. Carr, Nesse and Wortman (2006) indicate how the economic context shapes grieving practices, as many do not have the time to grieve.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The research findings confirmed that middle-aged widows and widowers in the Effutu Municipality faced a lot of challenges during bereavement and depression emerged the major psychological challenge. The depressed state of these middle-aged widows and widowers is due to the fact that the loss of a partner leads to a grief process that is characterized by deep sadness, depressed mood, anxiety, and loneliness as observed by Strobe and Hansson (1993). The findings of this study have several implications for Clinicians, Counsellors, policymakers, society, and families in Ghana, some recommendations have been made. The first addresses the psychological challenges faced by middle-aged widows and widowers during bereavement and the need for support. Depression was identified as a major psychological challenge for middle-aged Christian widows and widowers. There is a tendency to reject depressive symptoms as something socially and culturally acceptable, whereas significant distress associated with this could be harbingers of psychiatric illness often requiring attention (medical or otherwise). The need of the hour is to create awareness among the public in general through various means of mass media.

Indeed, clinicians and counsellors are likely to work with widows and widowers following this event, it would be helpful to provide empathy during this challenging experience. It would also be beneficial if widows and widowers who themselves have undergone such an experience (depression) come forward to help others. This can be done through group counselling or focus group discussions where experiences are shared to create a sense of belonging, and help them understand themselves, and accept the situation. This would serve the twin benefits of rehabilitating these vulnerable groups as well as providing the much-needed care and support to the distressed ones among them.

NGOs and other self-help groups who come to the aid of such widows and widowers should be appraised by professional counsellors and clinicians on the possibility of such conditions (depressive disorders) so that proper attention and early intervention can be initiated. The positive impact the church can have on the life of a widow/ widower cannot be overstated. Churches can include bereavement counselling in their marriage counselling programmes, especially during pre and post-marital counselling to help would-be and married couples prepare, understand, and accept the reality of losing a spouse. Churches can put structures in place to help bereaved spouses to overcome grief and loss. Upon the death of a spouse, widows/ widowers lose their support base. It is imperative for churches to stand in the gap to address the practical needs of these vulnerable groups such as providing crisis counselling and social support services (i.e. financial and emotional support). Crisis counselling is necessary because widows/ widowers have a higher risk of dying immediately following the death of a spouse. They truly die of a broken heart (Bonnano, 2009). Churches must also be cognizant of the needs of the bereaved and can establish a Care Ministry and designate people to help. The role of the helpers will be to provide a listening ear, make frequent and ongoing phone calls and periodic visits to access the circumstances and situations of middle-aged widows and widowers and their families and to develop and implement a plan of care to meet their immediate and ongoing needs.

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