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Integral mission and shalom: Shalom for widows – an exploratory study from South Africa

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This paper defines the term ‘widow’ and outlines the key issues that widows face, especially in the Global South. It documents the results of an exploratory study on widows carried out by TWR-SA, a member of SALT Alliance. The paper will then explore some scriptures to understand God’s heart for widows and his commands to the church in this regard. It concludes with some practical suggestions for bringing about greater shalom for widows.

Introduction

“It can be said that there is no group more affected by the sin of omission than widows.” These are the strong opening words of the UN Report entitled *Widowhood: invisible women, secluded or excluded*.³ As churches and Christian development organisations, we are perhaps guilty of this sin. Despite clear and repeated biblical commands and examples about widows and God’s heart for them, the topic seems to be noticeably absent from the church and Christian development agenda, as well as that of the secular development agenda. Why is this? Widows appear to have been lost within the larger gender issue, with data seldom disaggregated by sex and marital status (UN Report: 2001).

Zoe Gwala of TWR-SA was moved by the plight of widows in the communities where her organisation works, and decided to conduct some exploratory research to understand their situation better. This has brought the plight of widows to the attention of Micah Global member SALT Alliance, of which TWR-SA is a member. The writers of this article feel that the time has come as churches and Christian development organisations to research, raise awareness and act with and on behalf of widows—challenging ourselves, our churches and organisations, our communities, governments and international bodies. In so doing, we will be responding to a clear command from God and finding ways for widows to know the “life to the full” (John 10:10) that Jesus came to bring to all people.

Introducing the widow

Definition

The term widow is used for a woman who has lost her spouse by death and has not married again. We are told that the word is descended from ancient roots meaning 'to be empty' or 'to be destitute'.⁴ This raises the question as to whether, even in today's society, a widow is simply a woman who has lost her spouse and remains unmarried, or is at times a woman who is empty, without hope or peace.

Globally, widows represent 7 to 16 per cent of all adult women, although the figure is far higher in some countries. Widowhood in developed countries is found mostly amongst older women, whilst in developing countries it affects larger numbers of younger women and even girls⁵. One of the main problems in understanding the situation of widows is their absence from statistics as a group in development and human rights literature, where data is seldom disaggregated by marital status in the same way as by sex and age.

Key issues faced by widows

Widows vary greatly in age, personality, culture and nationality, but across the world and especially in the Global South they face similar issues. The key issues are listed below.⁶

Stress

Stress research shows that the death of a spouse is the most stressful event a person is likely to encounter in their lifetime. The loss of one's lifetime companion may result in social isolation, difficulty adjusting to a new partner-less identity, the erosion of social status and benefits associated with being married, as well as assumption of new roles. For most surviving spouses, the death of a spouse brings about material deprivation which also increases stress.⁷

Poverty and lack of property rights

Many widows living under customary and religious law in traditional societies have no or very limited rights to inheritance. Nor can they inherit, on an equal basis with male siblings, from their father's estate. Even if the countries they are living in are signatories to international agreements that ensure equal rights of inheritance to men and women, these agreements are

not always well implemented. “In many countries, across a wide range of religions and ethnic groups, a woman is left destitute when her husband dies”.⁸

The impact of armed conflict

Armed conflict has contributed to an increase in widows and the burden they carry. In several countries, in the post-conflict years, more than 70 per cent of children depend on widowed mothers or grandmothers as their sole support. Widows also tend to congregate in refugee camps, as there is no male relative to accompany them back to their communities and to help them rebuild homes and income sources. In conflict and post-conflict situations, an unprotected woman is susceptible to rape and other forms of abuse.

Ill health

In the context of HIV/AIDS, and if the husband has died of this disease, widows (especially in Africa) are particularly vulnerable. A widow may have contracted the disease herself and spent all the family’s resources on health care for her husband and on the subsequent funeral. If she has the disease, she may have no savings left to pay for her own health care. She may also be put at risk of infection, as mourning rites may involve sexual relations or marriage with infected male relatives.

Violence

Widows are often the victims of violence in the context of inheritance, land and property disputes, or to retain a dowry that was paid. Traditional mourning and burial rites may involve harmful and degrading treatment that constitutes gender-based violence. Widows participate in these rites to avoid losing social status and protection, prevent eviction from the family home or having their children taken from them.

Exclusion from the economy

Many widows have had limited opportunities for education and training and did not work commercially prior to marriage. This limits their ability to generate income once widowed. It should be noted, however, that widows of all ages work in various caring and domestic roles in the informal sector, mostly unpaid.

Summary of the status of widows

In summary, the common experience of widows around the world includes loss of social status, reduced economic circumstances and the threat or actuality of violence and illness. Many women who become widows, however, are resourceful and resilient and go on to have fulfilling lives. The words of Maria Cattell are helpful in this regard:

There is no “typical” widow. Each woman’s experiences are uniquely her own, and even within a given sociocultural framework, widows have very different experiences. Culture and kinship—highly subjective and flexible—are invoked and reinterpreted, negotiated and reimagined as individuals struggle to survive and to maximize their opportunities.⁹

However, there is an urgent need to address the “sin of omission” related to widows as many suffer severely because of their widowhood:

Neglected by social policy researchers, international human rights activists and the women’s movement, and consequently by Governments and the international community, the legal, social, cultural and economic status of the world’s widows now requires urgent attention at all levels of society, given the extent and severity of the discrimination they experience.¹⁰

Will we heed these words and act?

Profile of widowhood from two South African communities

Widowhood is always contextual. Here, two SALT Alliance members share their reflections on widowhood in their communities.

Ndebele widows in Mpumalanga Province, South Africa

Ernest Lebogang Matsela of SALT Alliance Member Thembaletu Community Centre reports:



We work with a predominantly Ndebele cultural group just east of Pretoria, Gauteng. In this culture, when a husband dies the woman has to mourn her husband for a one-year period, wearing a special outfit we call *inzilo*. The cloth for this outfit is usually bought and sewn before the burial. It differs in colour but often the black or dark colours such as green, purple and navy blue are preferred. It is only after a year that a cleansing ritual ceremony is performed, effectively relieving the woman from wearing black clothes which are then burnt.

Come the burial day, the widow is allowed to accompany her deceased husband to his resting place. Her face remains covered. In the process, a cow and a goat are slaughtered as an indication that a head of the family has passed away.

The widow is expected to remarry the younger brother of her deceased husband. It is believed that she will, together with the children, be looked after very well. This practice is called “Ukuphakelwa”. In addition, she is expected to share her inheritance from her husband with her in-laws. Socially, she is no longer trusted in the family and is often called names. If she does not marry a younger brother, she is banned from re-marrying and forever remains single.

The majority of husbands in our community seem to have died after long illnesses. Often, the cause of death is not disclosed. In most cases, it is suspected that they died of HIV/AIDS. Afraid of being isolated and stigmatised, men end up not disclosing their status and thus do not take any medication.

In the Ndebele culture a woman is usually a housewife whilst her husband is the bread-winner. Therefore, in the absence of a bread-winner, the widow is left with the serious challenges of having to support herself and her children as a single parent. She is often hated by her in-laws on suspicion that she is responsible for the death of her husband.

To earn a living for themselves and their children, widows usually venture into small businesses such as collecting tins and bottles for recycling in exchange for money. Some start vegetable gardens while others do beading work or become domestic workers. Some women prefer to remain as house wives, depending on their children’s Social Support Grants.

Our organization runs a Family Development Programme which reaches out to widows indirectly. Its focus is not on widows *per se*, but on orphaned and vulnerable children. Where widows are identified, we offer food parcels once a month. We have found widows to be often vulnerable, living under debilitating structures, and unemployed.



Simangele Siwele of SALT Alliance Member CMD/Usizo (serving as eThembeni) reports:

We work in and around Ladysmith in KwaZulu-Natal, predominantly with the Zulu culture. In this cultural group, most deaths appear to be HIV/Aids-related.

There are strict requirements of a wife when she is widowed. She is required to respect her husband by sitting in a special place in their bedroom after his death and she must cover herself with a blanket. In the week before the burial, the Zulu are in mourning and community members will pay condolences before burial. Burials usually happen on Saturdays. The wife attends the burial, after which she must wear black attire almost every day for a whole year. A cleansing ceremony is conducted at the end of this time, after which she is free to wear whatever she wants.

Some of the challenges a widow faces include lack of income as the family's primary breadwinner is deceased. There are often fights between the in-laws and the widow over the deceased's property and possessions. The widow will try to hold onto an inheritance for her children, while the in-laws tell her that the inheritance reverts back to the man's family.

Widows attend CMD's existing statutory interventions, self-help groups and family preservation programmes. However, there is no programme as yet that specifically focuses on widows.

Exploratory research on widows from KwaZulu-Natal

Zoe Gwala heads up the women's programme at Trans-World Radio South Africa. After hearing about the high numbers of widows in Molweni, a very small village in rural KwaZulu-Natal, Zoe instigated a formal TWR-SA research project that incorporated five villages in the Ethekweni District.

Research summary

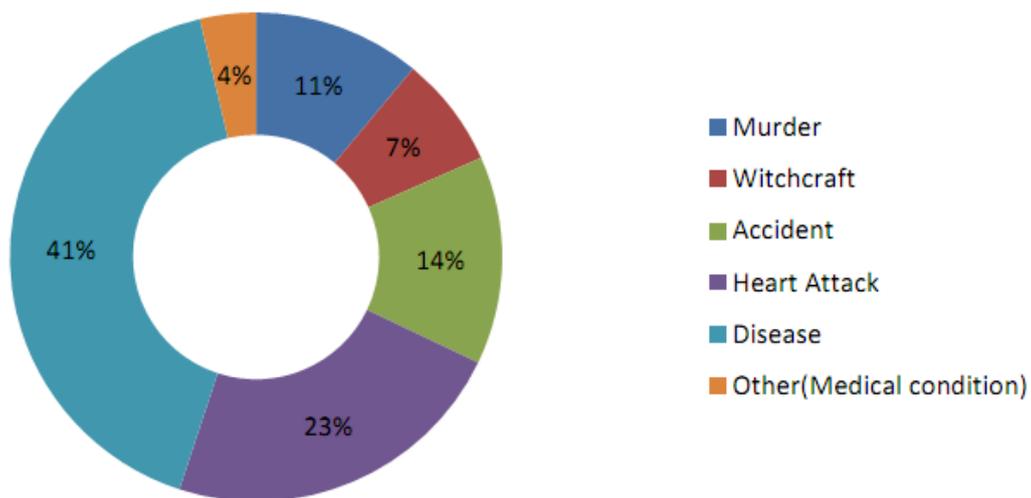
The term ‘widow’ is a name assigned to any woman whose husband has died. In the Zulu culture, widowhood entails a reposition within society. Both cultural practices relating to widowhood and cultural views on widowhood serve to create an entirely new identity, role and position for the widow within her community and broader society.



Causes of widowhood

Research showed that two-thirds of husbands died because of medical reasons (illness, heart attacks or disease). Many women shared how their husbands had been sick for a long time but refused to go for treatment, fearing stigma or shaming by the community and elders. This is typical behaviour in a region where HIV/AIDS is rife and socially hidden.

HUSBAND'S CAUSE OF DEATH



Surprisingly just 14% of the men died through accidents (this area has a large migrant population), while 18% were either murdered or subjected to witchcraft.

Cultural practices

In Zulu culture, when a woman marries, she becomes part of the husband's family. Few men have formal, legal wills, or plans in place for provision and security for their wives and family when they die. Therefore, when he dies, his possessions revert back to his family and not to his widow and children. All major decision-making also reverts back to the family, including burial arrangements and inheritances.

Society expects that the costs of the death and burial be carried by the widow; in cases where the deceased was working, it is assumed that the widow has money. Death expenses are not limited to the funeral. For example, a widow is expected to erect a tombstone for her husband one year after his death, at a cost of up to R6000 (UD\$470). Sometimes this is done without any financial assistance from her dead husband's family. Cultural beliefs state that the soul of her husband will haunt her otherwise.

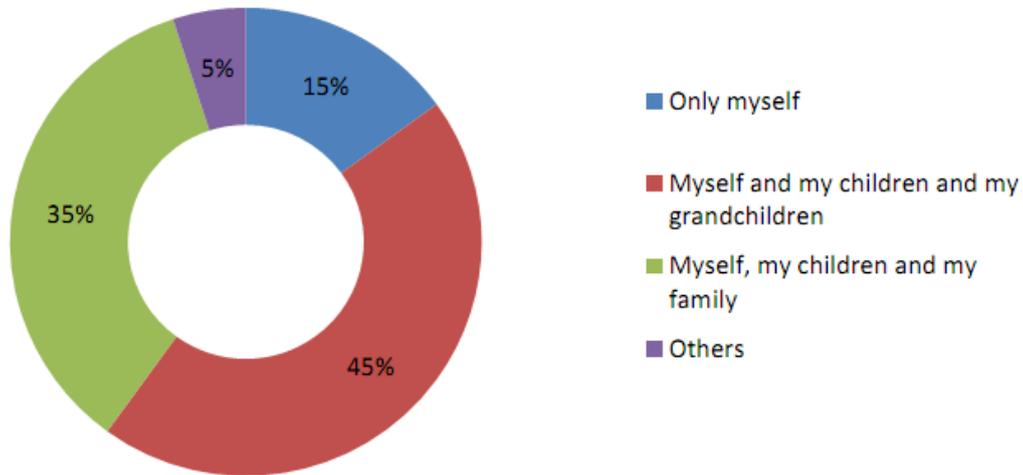
Practically, the widow is physically isolated, with people avoiding her after the burial. One widow shared "...after the burial you don't see a single church member coming to visit. You are left in a very, very lonely situation". Many widows confided that this isolation was the most torturous experience they have ever gone through.

Widowed women are also not allowed to talk to their neighbour's husbands. Previously close friendships have to be pushed to a certain distance because of the change in marital state: phone calls must be shortened, the widow may no longer visit in her neighbours' homes or spend extended time with her married friends.

Support for widows

80% of widows within the geographical area researched are unemployed, age 36 or older and have been widowed for more than six years. These women support (alone) on average three to five children each, as well as their immediate family and, very often, five or six grandchildren too.

WHO DOES A WIDOW SUPPORT?



Widows in South Africa currently do not receive any financial provision from government, but have to apply for disability grants or old age pensions when they reach the required age.

Research showed that 45% of the widows interviewed receive no financial or material support from children, family or church:

When we were doing survey, we found most of widows are not working and also they are looking after grandchildren, about five to six grandchildren and you will think that maybe their parents are at work, no, they passed away. When they see people coming in their house, they are hoping that maybe they are coming to provide them with food parcels or money.

The impact on the family unit

The minimal family or community support for widows in terms of their practical needs, let alone their social or psychological needs, affects children tremendously. Reacting to the loss of their fathers, the study showed that 20% of the children of widowed women end up dropping out of school.

Beyond the everyday challenges of raising children in an unstable environment, these mothers struggle to maintain discipline and respect. Mothers battle to discipline their children, often resorting to psychological manipulation or bribery to obtain obedience. A high percentage of children

engage in destructive behaviour like verbal abuse, acting out, using drugs and alcohol, joining gangs, crime and teenage promiscuity.

The strength of faith



Surprisingly, many of the widows interviewed look at life positively despite their difficult life circumstances.

Most of the women believed in prayer and had a strong personal faith. One widow shared:

... if it wasn't for God who gave me strength to press on, I was going to follow my husband. The most difficult part is to see families and friends neglecting us, but we thank God that although they pushed us away, someone is always willing to comfort and wipe out our tears that is why we are strong even today.

It is evident that the local church has a key role to play in the support of widows in KwaZulu-Natal.



A story of hope from Molweni

In Molweni, approximately 150 widows have come together to form a support group they call Umyezane. The women support each other through prayer, food parcels, sharing, skills and encouraging each other to stand up and do something in their community that can help other widows too.

TWR-SA actions resulting from research

As a result of the research in the Kwanyuswa, Molweni, Shongweni, Inchanga and Mbumbulu communities (representative as a random sample of villages in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa), TWR-SA started developing a coordinated response to the needs of widows:

1. Support groups have been started in each of the communities, helping widows to encourage and support each other, get organised, start food gardens to feed their families and find employment through basic skills training opportunities.
2. Widows were identified who were suffering and required immediate support: a monthly food parcel is now delivered to each home to alleviate hunger.
3. Workshops that address loss, grief and trauma have been developed and are available to widows within their communities.
4. TWR-SA has developed radio programmes that are broadcast to local communities: these broadcasts share the obstacles that widows face, encourage widows to start self-employment opportunities, address the issues of self-esteem/loss and challenge communities/churches to care for their widows.

SALT Alliance actions resulting from the research

While other SALT Alliance members conduct various family and community strengthening programmes, only TWR-SA currently reaches out specifically to widows. However, since sharing the TWR-SA research with other SALT Alliance members, the Alliance Secretariat has carried out a brief survey with the other five member organizations of the challenges facing widows in their communities. As a result of this survey and dissemination of TWR-SA's research, the following actions have been taken, or are planned:

1. Member organizations have become more aware of the plight of widows in their communities.
2. One member organization has committed to future research into the challenges facing widows in Mpumalanga, South Africa.
3. A research survey outline (based on the research conducted by TWR-SA) has been put together for use by other non-profit organizations, community structures and local churches and is now freely available on the SALT Alliance website (see www.saltalliance.org).

4. SALT Alliance will be meeting in October 2015 and the position of widows will be discussed as a cross-cutting issue in the family and community strengthening, and advocacy programmes of the Alliance.

If we truly believe that it is God who leads us in his mission, we can say that as an Alliance, we feel that God and God alone has led us to this agenda for widows.

Concluding thoughts following the research project

In most African cultures the church and contextualized theology should work at providing refuge, as well as spiritual and emotional support for widows.

Practically, churches and NGOs can together provide practical interventions countering the cultural beliefs and practices that subjugate widows.

Zoe Gwala shares:

During this research project, widows shared stories of what hampered them and what helped them in dealing with the death of their husbands. The research team said that some widows shared that simply being listened to had helped bring personal healing. In almost every case, prayer was requested, and many women of the women interviewed came to personal faith, or a renewed commitment to Christ.

An ongoing challenge is to create these safe spaces for all widows to be heard. Healing, and shalom, is an ongoing process.

God's heart for widows – a biblical perspective

The Bible has much to say about God's loving care and intent for widows. We can look firstly at the commands clearly set out for the nation of Israel in the Pentateuch, and at some of the challenges widows faced even as the new nation of Israel was being established under the leadership of Moses.

Mosaic law expressly commands "Do not take advantage of the widow or the fatherless" (Exodus 22:22) and the people of Israel are warned sternly that "Cursed is anyone who withholds justice from the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow" (Deuteronomy 27:19). We see that in biblical times (as in modern times) the property of the widow was not exempt from seizure, and God is the one who protects her property: "The LORD tears down the house of the proud, but he sets the widow's boundary stones in place" (Proverbs 15:25).

By this we can infer that life in Biblical times could be rather tough for widows. It seems that there were cases when widows were discriminated against and taken advantage of. Job describes these evildoers while pleading his case to God: “They prey on the barren and childless woman, and to the widow they show no kindness” (Job 24:21).

This lack of care and justice shows that the people of Israel had to be reminded how God intended his people to live, and to care for and protect widows.

God's provision for the widow

In Deuteronomy 24:19 God commands: “When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the foreigner, the fatherless and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.” By this we see that God instructed his people to provide for those who were in need (the widow, the orphan and foreigners).

God instructed his people to set apart one tenth of their income and bring it to the Levites as part of their offering. This tithe was not only for the priests to use in the service of the Lord (as they were not farmers or merchants, but served in the temple), but also for the widows, orphans and sojourners: “When you have finished paying all the tithe of your produce in the third year, which is the year of tithing, giving it to the Levite, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, so that they may eat within your towns and be filled” (Deuteronomy 26:12). God clearly commands that the widow and fatherless were not to be ignored, but cared for and protected.

God's redemptive love for widows

We also see many examples of the redemption of God in the case of widows. Tamar, taken advantage of by her father-in-law Judah (Genesis 38), is found in the direct lineage of King David and the promised Messiah, as is Ruth, the foreigner redeemed by Boaz. The book of Ruth tells the inspiring story of how this young woman who was widowed early shows redemptive love to her mother-in-law, Naomi, also a widow.

Again and again we see God's provision for and intervention in the lives of widows through miracles. Elijah raised a widow's son from death in 1 Kings 17. Another widow's small amount of flour and oil miraculously did

not run out in the years that Elisha was hosted (2 Kings 4). In the New Testament, we read of Jesus, filled with compassion, raising a widow's son to life in the town of Nain (Luke 7:12).

Jesus shared parables about widows to illustrate important truths and pointed out widows who were without status in the eyes of men, but precious to God because of their love and devotion. (cf. Mark 12:41, the widow's mite.) Whilst on the cross, and close to death, Jesus made sure that his mother Mary, doubtless a widow, would be taken care of by his friend and disciple John (John 19:26).

God's command to his people regarding widows

God used the prophets to admonish Israel regarding widows, for example "Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause" (Isaiah 1:17); "Thus says the Lord of hosts, Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another, do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart" (Zechariah 7: 9-10).

The early church continued in the tradition of the prophets and of Jesus in their care for widows. We see how seriously the early church took this task, when seven men were appointed to see to the fair distribution of food amongst widows (Acts 6: 1-7). In addition, Paul devoted a substantial passage in his letter to Timothy regarding instructions for the church in Ephesus and fair treatment of widows, both by the families of the widows and by the local congregation (1 Timothy 5:1-16).

Indeed, James writes that "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress..." (James 1:27).

This mandate has not changed. Let us heed the call of God to ensure justice and mercy for widows.

Seeking shalom for widows

Defining shalom

Shalom is the ancient Hebrew word for peace and is still used today as a blessing when greeting or saying farewell in modern Israel. However,

shalom has a deeper and richer meaning than merely the absence of conflict (i.e. peace). According to Strong's Exhaustive Concordance, shalom means "completeness, soundness, welfare, peace."... Shalom is applicable to an external peace between two entities—such as individuals or nations—and to an internal sense of peace within the individual.

Micah Global takes the definition of Biblical shalom a step further and applies context:

Shalom [demands] transformation of unjust social and economic systems.

Violence may be considered the opposite of peace, but if we were to seek an opposite for Shalom, it would be injustice. The very character of God is one of justice, so when God reigns, or when things are as they should be [the Kingdom of God], then justice reigns.

... We need to ask ourselves then "what kind of justice leads to Shalom?"
... God's judgement of the nations of the earth is a judgement against the powerful who exploit the poor and vulnerable. His judgement is for those in need. From this we can understand that God calls us to help those in need, but he also calls us to hold those in power to account. This is integral to Shalom-making.

Micah Global Newsletter August 2015: Making Shalom

Seeking shalom for the widow – individually

In writing and researching for this article, the writers have been personally challenged to reflect on the widows they know—especially those in their own families—and ensure that, as far as is possible, they are treating them with loving kindness and ensuring they are justly treated by others. So the first act of seeking shalom for widows is a personal stock-take, possible confession, and then God-led action relating to the widows in our own lives. "Honour widows who are truly widows. But if a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God" (1 Tim 5:3, 4 & 16).

Seeking shalom if you are a widow, or currently a married woman

Likewise widows (and even married women who may well become widows one day), need to ensure that they are living a 'holy life', as all followers of Christ are called to live (1 Peter 1:13-21). The widow has a responsibility for her own behaviour, and a life well-lived in service for others commends

her to the care of the local congregation should she be a widow in need. (1 Timothy 6:9-10).

Seeking shalom for the widow – as a local church

Referring back to God’s heart for widows (above), the church as the people of God are called to protect widows in society and ensure they are justly treated. This may entail preaching and teaching against unjust cultural practices and advocating for laws to be executed that protect the vulnerable widow.

Churches are called to provide for widows in their congregation who have no other source of provision and who have been active in church service (1 Tim 6: 9 & 10). The instruction is to place them on a “widows’ roll”; in this way it is quite clear who is being cared for by the church and who is not. This instruction applies to older widows, those without family, those unlikely to re-marry or those unable able to find paying work to support themselves.

Churches are encouraged to spend time reading the biblical text with regards to widows, sharing stories and information about widowhood in their church and community, and praying for God to guide their response. They can also conduct a mini-research project, as TWR-SA did, to identify the widows in their community, and the challenges they face. (See www.saltalliance.org/resources.)

Churches should be preparing women, couples and families for the potential loss of a spouse by sharing information about the legal status and property rights of women, the need for wills that are legal and registered, along with financial planning and family planning.

And finally, the church needs to ensure that widows are included as active members who have an essential contribution to make to the body of local believers, based on their individual spiritual gifts and the call God has on each widow’s life.

Seeking shalom for the widow – as a Christian development organisation

Christian development organisations are encouraged to spend time reading scriptures related to widows, praying and discerning how God is calling you to respond. Here are some other suggested actions:

1. Conduct research regarding the status of widows in the communities where you work and seek an understanding of applicable cultural practices and norms.
2. Review your programmes and especially gender-based programmes to ensure that the widow is not an omitted group.
3. Formally record and make available your research findings regarding widows.
4. Connect on the topic of widows with local churches in the communities where you work. Encourage them to respond to the plight of widows and possibly follow the steps given above for churches.
5. Connect with other local and international development organisations to advocate for justice for the widow and for funding for work with widows.

Seeking shalom for the widow – as Micah Global

As Micah Global—individual members, country level and international expressions—we should consider our collective response to God’s call to seek justice and mercy for the widow. We could begin with an online survey to understand the status of work with widows across Micah Global, to study scripture and pray together, and to discern what God may be calling us to as a world-wide movement. This may possibly lead to establishing a forum for widows to promote research, advocacy and learning related to the widow. It is hoped that there will be an opportunity for those interested in this topic to find one another at the 2015 Micah Consultation in Peru, and subsequently through online collaborations and regional and/or national gatherings.

¹ www.saltalliance.org

² www.twr.org.za

³ United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women, Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2001): *Widowhood: invisible women, secluded or excluded*. http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/public/wom_Dec%2001%20single%20pg.pdf

⁴ <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/widow>

⁵ Widowers are far fewer and usually remarry, even if elderly. In Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, the ratio of widows to widowers (over 60 years of age in 1985 – 1987) was 44:7. They are also not so prone to harmful cultural practices on becoming widowers.

⁶ Information in this section, unless otherwise indicated, is summarised from UN Report: 2001 “Widowhood: invisible women, secluded or excluded”.

⁷ Somhlaba, N and Wait, J (2009): *Stress, Coping Styles, and Spousal Bereavement: Exploring Patterns of Grieving Among Black Widowed Spouses in Rural South Africa*. Journal of Loss and Trauma, 14:196–210, Taylor & Francis Group, LLC

⁸ United Nations, *Widowhood: invisible women, secluded or excluded*.

⁹ Cattell, M. (2008): *African Widows: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives*. Journal of Women & Aging. http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1300/J074v15n02_04#abstract

¹⁰ United Nations, *Widowhood: invisible women, secluded or excluded*.