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## OVERFLOWED WITH COMPASSION: A BIBLICAL MODEL FOR ADDRESSING DEPRIVATION FACED BY TODAY'S AFRICAN WIDOWS AND THEIR CHILDREN

Cara Salazar

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**OVERFLOWED WITH COMPASSION:  
A BIBLICAL MODEL FOR ADDRESSING DEPRIVATION FACED BY TODAY'S  
AFRICAN WIDOWS AND THEIR CHILDREN  
BY CARA SALAZAR**

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**Abstract**

Widows and their children constitute a population of more than 845 million worldwide. However, the mistreatment of widows in many cultures and countries is one of the most neglected gender and human rights issues, affecting not only the widow but also her children. The most severe conditions are found in Africa, where widows are greatly challenged by patrilinealism, disease, lack of education, stigma, property grabbing, and lack of economic opportunity. Home to nearly 25% of the world's Christians, Africa struggles to address the revolutionary changes needed to model the biblical treatment of widows. This paper aims to provide a clear picture of the realities of widowhood taking place on our second-largest continent, outline key issues facing widows, and provide solutions using the biblical widows of Zarephath and Nain to highlight ways we can model compassion and take action for African widows today.

**Keywords:** *widows, children, sub-Saharan Africa, women's rights, culture*

## Introduction

During the past 25 years, the plight of widows has been painfully absent from social justice reports despite a plethora of global statistics on women's poverty, development, health, and social justice needs. Through this sin of omission, the extreme deprivation of today's 260 million widows is just now coming to light with the creation of International Widows' Day in 2010, a United Nations observance held annually on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of June. The Loomba Foundation (2015) estimates that 14.8% of widows live in extreme poverty; that is, their basic needs are unmet, and 33% suffer from abuse. These estimates, though conservative, represent the cultural spectrum, but clearly show that the most acute mistreatment of widows is found in sub-Saharan Africa, where one in four women is a widow. How did this start?

For centuries, African men have been "encouraged to see power as dominating and controlling and are placed at the top" (Crane, 2014, p. 6). Though pockets of matrilineal societies in Africa exist, for example the Tonga of Zambia and the Akan of Ghana, Africa by-and-large is very patriarchal (Peterman, 2012). Viewed as the ones to continue the ancestry, sons are treated better than daughters because daughters will eventually be married into other families, where they will essentially become part of those other families. In most parts of sub-Saharan Africa, the practice of bride price – a groom's gift of money or goods to the bride's family upon marriage – is common (Mwesigwa, 2015). Often when a husband dies, the marriage contract is considered over, providing the widow with two, culturally appropriate choices: stay with the (husband's) family and remain single, or remarry and leave the family. Because the cultural emphasis in Africa is on men marrying virgins, "a widow rarely remarries, except to a male relative of her husband" (Crane, 2014, p. 12). A husband's family is supposed to look after his widow and children, as these traditions were established to safeguard the widow from harm. However, today these traditions are slowly loosening their grip due to a decrease in available agricultural land, HIV/AIDS devastation, and conflicting gender identities.

## Land as Livelihood

Land security equals livelihood in most corners of Africa. Land possession takes on a level of seriousness there "not typically seen elsewhere in the world" (The Loomba Foundation, 2015, p. 82). Once a woman becomes a widow, the land and house do not automatically belong to her, as in most Western cultures – instead it is traditionally passed down to the children. According to Pastor Ogechukwu Ibem, a Nigerian, Africans live a communal lifestyle, and after a husband dies, all possessions are shared accordingly.

"Land doesn't belong to the woman – she cannot take the family land," Ibem says. "Even if she wants to take the house, the family will say 'no' – this is a family property, a family heritage" (O. Ibem, personal communication, November 5, 2015).

Tradition does allow widows to live in the family home as long as she doesn't remarry.

Ownership of the home remains with the husband's family and the widow's presence is "merely permitted or tolerated" (Ezer, 2006, p. 12). However, due to scarcity of land, an increasing trend happening across Africa is property grabbing. This layman's term is used to describe the "unlawful and coercive eviction of lawful landowners through the use of physical force, forgery, fraud, threats, intimidation, property destruction and/or collective pressures" (International Justice Mission, 2014, p. 9).

Widows are particularly vulnerable to property grabbing due to entrenched sociocultural and gender norms that favor adult men over women and children. Occupying good farmable land can also be motivation for property grabbing. Intimidation tactics like threats, knocking down the house, and tearing down crops are sometimes used to drive the widow and her children from the property, thus leaving them subject to abuse and exploitation. The United Nations estimates that more than 30 percent of widows and orphans in sub-Saharan Africa experience property grabbing (Crane, 2014). In addition, a recent study of 15 African countries found that more than half of widows (ages 15 to 49) do not inherit any assets at all (Peterman, 2012). Despite these strong, revealing statistics, even Christian African men blame modernity, specifically the education of women, for the rise in property grabbing, Pastor David Ofumbi, a Ugandan national relates:

In a traditional African setting, there wouldn't be anything called land grabbing. In my culture there are different processes followed – things are culturally established. The idea of the land grabbing, this is where the women have gone to school and are educated, and are now detaching themselves from the cultural values. Africans are going to school and want their own land. That's where the land grabbing comes in. It is more of a problem of the influence of modernity in traditional settings (D. Ofumbi, personal communication, November 5, 2015).

Property grabbing is prevalent among widows in Africa because many do not understand their country's inheritance laws. Uganda, for example, has strict laws prohibiting the seizure of property belonging to widows and orphans, which includes:

Succession Act – Makes attempting to evict widows or unmarried orphans from the home of their deceased husband or father a criminal act.

Land Act – Makes occupying widows or unmarried orphans' property a criminal act.

Administrator General's Act – Makes intermeddling the estate administration and distribution after a death a criminal act.

Laws can only do what they are intended to do if a country's citizens understand them. Even if communities, clans, and local leaders are aware of these laws, they are "often ignored" in favor of traditional property distribution methods that favor men (International Justice Mission,

2014, p. 65). In a country like Uganda where nearly 85% of its people live in rural areas, agriculture is their livelihood, and without it widows cannot grow food for her family, let alone earn an income.

Tensions within a family can also result in threats and abuse toward widows and their children. A recent study of successful property grabbing in Uganda found that 31% of the widows and their children received threats, 18% received attempts threatening to end the widow's life, and 14% of widows and children were physically abused (International Justice Mission, 2014, p. 55). Overall, nearly 33% of widows worldwide, or 81 million, will suffer abuse, with the mistreatment of widows "most acute in sub-Saharan Africa" (The Loomba Foundation, 2015, p. 106).

The cruelty of taking a widow's property is not a recent trend. Jesus spoke of this very same issue while teaching in the temple courts. He issued a warning to those who taught religious law and then devoured widows' houses: "these men will be punished most severely" (Mark 12:40, New International Version). Just as it was two thousand years ago, should their land and property be seized or inheritance rights challenged, sub-Saharan African widows lack effective income alternatives to agriculture. Eviction can result in migration, often in deplorable conditions. In an attempt to recover her life, vulnerable widows will engage in sex work as a means of short-term survival. If a widow's husband did not die from HIV/AIDS and the widow is not HIV positive, sex work greatly increases her risk of becoming HIV positive (The Loomba Foundation, 2015, p. 93).

## HIV/AIDS

Globally, more than 36 million people were affected by HIV/AIDS at the end of 2015, with nearly 70% of them living in sub-Saharan Africa (World Health Organization, 2016). Despite the number of HIV cases decreasing in the United States, the pandemic continues to be a cause of widowhood and a cause of death among widows in rural Africa (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015). Two high-risk practices in sub-Saharan Africa responsible for HIV positive widows are the cultural traditions of widow cleansing and widow inheritance.

During the past century, Christianity has spread in tremendous numbers across the continent. Despite its influence, Africa has effectively held on to African Traditional Religions (ATR), which shape families, communities, clans, tribes, and countries. The beliefs associated with ATR are still very prevalent and fiercely upheld. Though there are variations to the practices that embody ATR, according to Turaki (2013), there are four commonly held foundational beliefs:

- Belief in impersonal (mystical) power(s)
- Belief in spirit beings

- Belief in divinities/gods
- Belief in the Supreme Being

These beliefs guide many things a widow is expected to do in the days, weeks, and sometimes months after the death of her husband. Superstition, lack of education and gender-based discrimination (widowers are not required to be cleansed) are drivers for the completion of widow cleansing. This ritual involves unprotected sex between a widow and one of her husband's relatives intended to break the bond with his spirit and save her from insanity. In some cases, if no male relative is available, the widow is required to hire a male 'cleanser' who she pays to perform the ritual. This humiliating and dangerous practice is carried out because not only the widow, but in some cases, the entire village is believed to come under a curse if the widow is not cleansed (Crane, 2014). This creates a virtual death sentence for countless widows living within communities ravaged by HIV/AIDS. The Loomba Foundation (2015) identifies the following countries as those who practice widow cleansing rituals: Angola, Botswana, Republic of Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Nigeria, Rwanda, Senegal, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

Often operating in tandem with widow cleansing is the practice of widow inheritance. Widow inheritance can be described as the modern day version of levirate marriage found in the Old Testament (Deut. 25:5-6, NIV):

If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband's brother shall take her and marry her and fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to her. The first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel.

Today, widow inheritance is defined as the "traditional cultural practice where a designated male assumes responsibility for the social and economic support of a widow upon the death of her husband" (Agot, 2010, pp. 1-2). Widow inheritance is essentially a marriage where inheritors can be brothers or cousins of the late husband, or they can have no biological relation. Almost always a polygamous marriage, the widow essentially becomes a second, third, or fourth wife. Despite an appearance that the inheritor is "taking care" of a vulnerable widow, in today's context it is "simply to acquire possessions" (Crane, 2014, p. 8). When a widow enters a plural marriage, sexual contact increases her likelihood of contracting HIV/AIDS, thus increasing the likelihood of her children becoming orphans.

### **Conflicting Gender Identities**

In general, the commonly accepted belief in Africa is that women are inferior and men are best at deciding what is good for women (Okoye, 2005). For decades women's rights organizations, non-government organizations, as well as local governments, have been advocating for the fair and just treatment of women. Despite generous education, aid, and health assistance from sympathetic countries, gender-based cultural traditions in Africa have largely stayed the same. Progress for women has been made, and not all women experience male oppression. But due to the large population that lives in poor, rural areas and the lack of educational opportunities for women, the problem persists.

Culturally, women are expected to take on a passive disposition in Africa. The expression of self is not something typically voiced, displayed or communicated. Young girls quickly understand gender-based roles and are expected to follow the rules. When a widow is a mother and is left to her own means to support her children, often the female children suffer the most. This phenomenon is commonly known as girl-child deprivation, the neglect faced by girls when family resources are scarce (The Loomba Foundation, 2015). In this pattern, male children are usually cared for and educated the best, ensuring the widow will be taken care of in her old age. A widow can also be incentivized by her in-laws to care for male children, ensuring the family heritage is carried through. UNESCO (2015) cites that girls in sub-Saharan Africa account for 55% of all out-of-school children.

In many clans, failure to comply with tradition by bucking carefully governed rules includes ostracism and the possibility of banishment. In a culture where one's identity within a community is strongly upheld as a value, women rarely resist tradition. Many women today still believe men should have a higher social status compared to women. Even in urban settings, some women want men to have authority over them because they "take on a lot of responsibility in the family, so they should have more power" (Wyrod, 2008, p. 810). As testified by Monica Nsofu, a nurse and AIDS organizer working to end widow cleansing in Zambia, changing gender expectations is hard in cultures that have practiced certain traditions for a very long time.

It is very difficult to end something that was done for so long. We learned (widow cleansing) when we were born. People ask, 'Why should we change?' We are telling them, 'If you continue this practice, you won't have any people left in your village' (LaFraniere, 2005, pp. A1, A8).

As stated earlier, African widows rarely remarry out of their own choice. Gender rules vary from area to area, but generally men whose wives have died find themselves able to freely remarry without shame or question. According to Pastor Ibem, no one asks a man who wants to remarry, 'what are you doing?' He adds, but if it happens to a woman, "society will jump on her suspecting her of killing the husband" (O. Ibem, personal communication, November 5,

2015). The New Testament is very clear that it is acceptable and advised that “younger widows marry, have children, manage their homes and to give the enemy no opportunity for slander” (1 Timothy 5:14, NIV). In sub-Saharan Africa, this verse should be modeled because many widows are not necessarily elderly, but rather have become a widow as a result of conflict, disease, or male low life expectancy.

### **A Model of Faith and Compassion**

Scripture provides a redemptive example of how to care for widows. With more than 80 references highlighting the action, reasoning and warnings of not caring for widows, it is clear that this is a group of women of great importance to God. Dozens of scripture examples could be applied to addressing the needs of widows in sub-Saharan Africa, but two specific stories are of great value: the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17) and the widow of Nain (Luke 7). These are redemptive and reflect God’s heart to provide for his children, widow or not.

The story of the widow of Zarephath opens with her and her young son miraculously surviving a devastating famine. She is literally at a place of desperation, with only a handful of flour and a drop of oil left. As she collects sticks for a meager meal, she hears a stranger call out to her, asking her for a drink of water and then a slice of bread. “As surely as the Lord your God lives,” she answers, “I don’t have any bread” (Tucker, 2014, p. 190). It turns out the stranger, Elijah, tells her to bake a loaf of bread and that God will provide enough flour and oil until the famine ends. She obeys.

The story continues later with the death of the widow’s son. She is furious at Elijah when he comes to her house. Taking the boy, Elijah cries out to God asking him to return the boy to life. Amazingly, the boy wakes up, alive, and the widow is stunned. “Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord from your mouth is the truth,” she says (1 Kings 17:24, NIV).

The story of the widow of Zarephath serves as a preview of what Jesus will do when he ushers in the new covenant. The prophets, like Elijah, were waiting for the Messiah. God knew that this widow would be alone if not for her only son. There is no mention of anyone supporting her during the famine, no mention of relatives relieving her from her daily chores. Yet, God extends his mercy to her through the obedience of Elijah. Likewise, we see Jesus raise the widow of Nain’s son in the book of Luke.

The widow of Nain, like the widow of Zarephath, had only one son. This time he was being carried in a large funeral procession. “When the Lord saw her, his heart overflowed with compassion. ‘Don’t cry!’ he said” (Luke 7:13, New Living Translation). With that he touched the coffin and commanded the man to get up. News of the miracle spread and this once distraught widow is reunited with her son.



This story can be used to show salvation – God’s free gift to us all. Just as the son was dead, all of humanity is dead in sin. Jesus came to raise us to life, just as he did the man. There was absolutely nothing we, nor the widow’s son, could have done to get a second chance, except to accept it. The inclusion of these two stories in the Bible is reflective of God’s heart for the widow and providing for her needs. In both instances, the widow’s situation was serious. After the funerals, these widows would have likely been without money, vulnerable and alone. They are a lot like today’s African widows who are often stigmatized, rejected and left to their own resources to start life over. Jesus’ knowledge of the cultural traditions and mistreatment of widows is not by coincidence. Likewise, he sees the plight of millions of widows around the world today and is looking to the church to step up. This is a large task, but through examination of Jesus’ example, these three recommendations address simple steps that can greatly benefit the needs of African widows today:

- Provide biblical teaching and preaching on the proper care of widows
- Influence political, civic leaders, headmen, chiefs and leaders to advocate the needs of widows
- Increase networking of widows across churches, denominations and countries

Regardless of gender, cultural expectation, ritual or age, the church in Africa should uphold Jesus’ model of compassion for today’s widow. Embracing a deeper level of compassion starts when we educate, share and come together as the body of Christ. As described in Margaret Owen’s book *A world of widows*, a poor widow’s house was seized by her brother-in-law. Ten friends of the widow marched to the house with garden tools in hand ready to confront the man, but they didn’t have to. Someone saw the women and ran to tell the brother-in-law. By the time the women arrived he had jumped out the window and never came back.

This is a true example of what is possible when believers around the world start standing up for widows.

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