

THE ORDEAL OF "PROPERTY STRIPPING" FROM WIDOWS IN A PERI-URBAN COMMUNITY: THE CASE OF A SELECTED WARD IN BINGA DISTRICT, ZIMBABWE

Misheck Dube

The death of a husband is a common traumatic experience for widows in Zimbabwean communities. This paper discusses widows' experiences of property stripping in a peri-urban community of Sikalenge Ward, Binga District in Matabeleland North in Zimbabwe. It is a qualitative research study. Participants were key informants about social service provision for widows who had been stripped of property upon the death of their spouses. Thematic data analysis showed that widows suffer social exclusion and marginalisation upon the death of their partners. This article aims at supplementing the theoretical knowledge of social work practitioners and suggests concrete interventions in addressing this plight of Zimbabwean widows.

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INTRODUCTION

Every time a man dies a woman is caught between countless challenges for the remainder of her life. Even though the phenomenon of widowhood is not new, many communities do not seem ready to deal with this traumatising experience, especially the relatives of the deceased. Estimates show that widows make up approximately 16% of the population of women globally, with a possibility that this figure could be even higher in some parts of the world (Trivedi, Sareen & Dhyani, 2009). In Zimbabwe a woman remains the target of abuse after she has lost her husband. A common phenomenon is that in-laws demand an explanation from the woman for the cause of the death of their son in instances where the cause of death is unknown. Where death has been the result of HIV and AIDS, the widow is perceived as having infected her deceased husband. Sadly, the widow is not spared from “property stripping” by in-laws. Property stripping implies “depriving a widow of acquired or inherited movable or immovable possessions that rightfully and legally belong to that person” (Dube, 2011). In this paper “property stripping” and property grabbing are terms linked to this dispossession and are used interchangeably. Property stripping is a common challenge for many widows in Sikalenge Ward of Binga District in Zimbabwe, where the woman is dispossessed of property after the death of her husband (Ntengwe for Community Development, 2009; Nyathi, 2012).

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Whittaker (2012), a literature review is “a comprehensive summary and critical appraisal of the literature that is relevant for a research topic.” The paucity of literature that discusses the plight of widows in the field of social work is alarming. The literature is even more scanty for literature on intervention in property inheritance disputes (Dube, 2011). Literature that delves into the problem of property inheritance is sourced from other disciplines such as law, where many interventions are legally handled. There is therefore a need to demonstrate and initiate a link between social work and law.

“Social work is social order” in the famous words of Payne (2005). Social work’s roles and values, namely to enhance the worth and dignity of individuals and promote equality, are mediated through law and the organisations within which social work is practised (Payne, 2005). Customary laws in Zimbabwe are mainly used to dispossess widows of their property, and these customary laws gain power from norms, customs and traditions which are social constructions that fall within the domain privileging a patriarchal social order. Law and social agencies, according to Payne, are social work’s context, making it a part of the wider social order because it is partly constructed by the same sources from which it gains its authority. The goal of the study is to analyse the

experience of property inheritance of widows in Sikalenge Ward of Binga District in Zimbabwe and to recommend relevant interventions.

Historical roots of property stripping in Zimbabwe

The practice of property stripping in Zimbabwe has been attributed to the colonial past. The main hurdle has been seen as the dual legal system that the colonialists used to disadvantage Africans and their women. To that end a dual legal system, in which different laws applied to different races, was enforced (Banda, 2007; Ndlovu-Bhebhe, 2012). Despite the complexity of its application, this discriminatory dual legal system which prevailed in the colonial era still applies in Zimbabwe, even though the country is independent. These discriminatory laws have been entrenched in Zimbabwe and they continue to dispossess widows of their right to inheritance of property.

A good example is the way that women are excluded in Zimbabwe from rural leadership positions such as becoming chiefs or village heads. These are traditionally inherited and not elected. Inheritance is mostly patrilineal in Zimbabwe. Women can hardly inherit a chieftom and headmanship. The reason is that they were regarded as “perpetual minors” (Women’s International News Network, 2006) and because they would not be able to look after their original family because of commitments to their new family. This disregard for women as heirs has been extended to property matters and hence women find it hard to inherit property in Zimbabwe.

The law and property inheritance in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwean widows are exposed to property stripping, which has been a rampant and topical issue in the country. The rights of women are at the centre of property debates as women activists and advocates push for the rights of women against the rigid patriarchal system.

The legal system in effect during the colonial past included both general law and customary law. Despite its effect on women, the Zimbabwean government adopted this colonial relic and it is still in effect today. General law governs civil marriages and holds that a wife of the deceased may automatically be the owner of the property upon death of the husband. This applies if the deceased was married according to civil law, which is “a registered marriage often called Chapter 37 Marriage.” This Chapter 37 Act has now been changed to the Marriages Act [Chapter 5] (Law Hub, 2015). Customary law, on the other hand, dictates that property be devolved according to the customs and usages of the ethnic group to which it applies (Banda, 2007). The use of such a dual legal system confuses the management of the estate upon the death of the male co-owner of property. Furthermore, it is a source of ambiguity and confusion, and constitutes the prevailing unfair practices in property inheritance such as property grabbing.

The year 1982 was remarkable for Zimbabwe year for Zimbabwe when it was made a constitutional provision that women were equal in status with men before the law: the

permanent minority status ascribed to women by colonial laws were over. The Legal Age of Majority Act (LAMA), adopted in 1982 shortly after independence, provided that all “Zimbabweans – female and male, African and white – attained full adult status at the age of eighteen, for all purposes, including customary law” (Dube, 2011). Ostensibly, this Act was supposed to remove the minority status of women and put them on a par with their male counterparts before the law.

LAMA was in itself ground-breaking in addressing the central issue of women’s oppression under African customary law (Saki & Chiware, 2007). Women constitutionally lacked capacity to act as legally recognised adults, capable of owning property, entering into contracts and making legally enforceable decisions without male consent. The LAMA was therefore enacted because customary laws were repressive. However, customary law in itself was not removed from the constitution and is still operational. Determination of which law is operational, and when, has been left in the hands of those presiding over cases of property inheritance.

Property inheritance experiences of widows in Zimbabwe

The literature has shown that the experience of property inheritance of widows in Zimbabwe is quite intricate and indicates that the patriarchal nature of Zimbabwean society disadvantages widows, and women in general, since it strips them of their property rights. The debate about custom, culture and tradition has been most intense in property inheritance cases. This is because in Ndebele and Shona customs women do not inherit property when their husbands die intestate (Share, 2013). Similarly, in cultures like the Tonga, Nyanja, Kalanga and Nambia, when men die intestate, the traditions and customs of these polities provides that property is taken either by male relatives of the husband or the eldest son in the deceased’s family.

Even though there are no hard statistics on women’s inheritance problems in Zimbabwe, scholarly articles, media and workshop reports provide useful information and proof of the dire situation of widows who have had property stripped away from them. At a seminar in Harare various experiences were presented by widows as testimony to the critical conditions that widows are exposed to (Izumi, 2006). One widow had this to say:

“When he [husband] passed away the relatives had intense conflicts for me and had to ask me to vacate our marital home after I refused to have the young brother come in as my husband. I was forced to join my ailing mother who had a hut in Tsholotsho where my other children are.”

This 30-year-old widow with three children testified that the in-laws ordered her to leave the house and their matrimonial property, including livestock, and accused her of bewitching her late husband (Dube, 2011).

Maphosa (2013) quotes one widow in Bulawayo who had this to say: *“When my husband passed away, we had a house in Mpopoma, a car and a house in Gwanda. When he died in a car accident at work, all this vanished.”* The in-laws are mostly the perpetrators of this violence and aggression against widows in all such cases. This is

contrary to the inheritance laws in Zimbabwe which protect widows against property grabbing. Yet the Intestate Succession Act, enacted in 1997, seems to be practically ineffective to combat property grabbing in Zimbabwe.

There is an urgent need to harmonise the laws in Zimbabwe as has been revealed by the media, since current laws are inclined towards discrimination on the basis of sex. The Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN, 2015) has noted that although Zimbabwe's constitution forbids discrimination on the basis of gender, it allows this clause to fall away where it runs contrary to customary law. This makes it difficult for a widow to inherit property upon the death of her husband. This legal duality has strongly helped to sustain the discrimination against women by legal officials.

The legal case of *Magaya versus Magaya* in 1999, which was recently appealed in court, set a precedent for continued discrimination against women in inheritance matters (Southern Africa HIV and AIDS Information Dissemination Services (SAfAIDS), 2009). In this case Venia, who was the eldest daughter of the deceased Shonhiwa Lennon Magaya, was denied heirship because she was female. Instead, the court ordered Nakayi, who was younger than her and a second son born to the second wife, to be the heir to the estate. This sparked controversy, emphasising the need to change the laws in Zimbabwe as they proved to be discriminatory against women. The judges in the case above considered that the "nature of African society" demotes women to a lesser status, especially in the home.

In a separate incident another woman and her two children were also dispossessed of all the property and evicted from their house in Bindura upon the death of her husband (SOS Children's Villages International, 2013). In this incident the woman described her ordeal as "the hardest imaginable era which no woman on earth would want to live" (SOS Children's Villages International, 2013).

The literature review has clearly shown that taking legal intervention measures against socially prescribed discrimination does not resolve the problems associated with property stripping. More is needed if intervention is to be comprehensive and responsive to the daily socio-cultural and economic problems of the widows. It is therefore argued that in Zimbabwe more than just legal intervention is required to help to solve the ordeal of property grabbing from widows. The intervention measures need to follow social approaches to address the entrenched and rampant discrimination of women in communities in Zimbabwe.

Theoretical perspectives to property stripping

Theories that attempt to explain "property stripping" among widows have adopted a "violence against women" perspective. Radical feminist theory, cultural theory and culture of violence theory are among the approaches to explain explicitly the insidious acts of grabbing property from widows as violence against women.

Radical feminist theory

Radical feminist accounts abound with "violence against women" discourses (Randall, 2008). In their epistemology of violence against women radical feminists argue that

property grabbing from women and widows constitutes violence against women. The radical feminist theories blame patriarchy for the entrenched violence against women in society, citing that men have control over society and its resources (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2013). Widows are generally voiceless recipients of violence, which Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman, (2013) described as “passive acceptance.” An interpretation of this violence in Zimbabwe is aligned to pervasive gender inequalities and the patriarchal order that continues to place women under perpetual subordination.

The radical feminist theoretical argument is that the cardinal element of patriarchy is a relationship of domination. The feminists argue that the core of the exploitive tendencies of men is the use of patriarchal tools such as culture, traditions and norms which members of a given group are obliged to observe. As is the case with women in Zimbabwe, radical feminists have claimed that men use social systems and other methods of control to keep women oppressed and that this constitutes traditional social pathologies (Zastrow, 2010). The radical feminists’ vision is to see a society free from domination of men. There is an excess of allegiance to male dominance and oppression of women in Zimbabwe, and radical social approaches are crucial to address such rampant oppression of women in the country.

Cultural theory

Randall (2008) asserts that cultural theory highlights the supremacy of “tradition and norms within African culture” to explain the prevailing epidemic of violence against women in general and property stripping of widows in particular. Culture has been customised and used to oppress women and to silence them from expressing their inheritance rights. From an understanding that culture observes shared traditions, beliefs, values and norms that control the behaviour of people built upon, cemented and inherent in patriarchal attitudes and beliefs (Weiten, 2010), property grabbing then becomes an institutionalised act against which no woman ought to speak.

Cultural theorists see a direct connection between traditional norms and violence against women, giving an example of wife-battering being regarded as normal within traditional African culture. In corroboration of this point, more indirect cultural explanations have been given, pointing, for example, to the uneven distribution of power within traditional African marriages, the “impact of polygamy, the power of the extended family over the married couple, and the almost universal institution of bride price as underlying the widespread abuse of women” (Randall, 2008).

Cultural theory explains violence against women as emboldened in traditions and norms within the patriarchal system so criticised by radical feminist theories and hence cultural theory endorses the classical argument of radical feminists who fight against patriarchy. With intensified practices, traditions and norms that oppress women in Zimbabwe, there is a clear indication that cultural theories are significant in shaping social interventions that address the plight of the widows in the country.

Culture of violence theory

The history of violence explores the route to a possible future of violence and the ways in which people will conduct themselves in the future. This could be attributed to the

fact that history has a strong bearing on the values and behaviours of the people concerned. Following that line of argument, Mashiri (2013) argues that the politically violent historical past of Zimbabwe has made a significant contribution towards the current regime of violence against women.

Randall (2008) argues that many Africans experienced violent coercion from the colonisers and hence inherited that practice of harsh treatment towards others. Long-lasting civil wars and the exploitative practices of many post-colonial governments have entrenched the legacy of this “culture of violence” in family situations, with women suffering the most (Randall, 2008).

Mashiri (2013) maintains that a characteristic of philosophies of colonisation is “power inequalities and oppression of the powerless.” The less powerful group is then controlled by the most powerful, which then manipulates it with the goal of acquiring resources to the detriment of the colonised. This is why men in Zimbabwe have continuously oppressed women. This has seriously disadvantaged women and robbed them of their property inheritance rights. Viewed from that perspective, the culture of violence theorists urge a radical social decolonisation of the property inheritance processes in order to address the rampant discrimination against women. This is also targeted at according widows property inheritance rights which are grossly violated in Zimbabwe.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was influenced by radical feminist theory, which then shaped the methodology of the study to suit the phenomenon under investigation.

Research method

The study adopted a qualitative research method (Hennink, Hunter & Baily, 2011) to capture the in-depth descriptions of the “property stripping” problems faced by widows from the social service providers’ perspectives. This enabled capturing of in-depth information from the social service providers.

Population of the study

Gray (2005) defines a population as “the total number of possible units or elements that are included in the study.” In this study the population was comprised all of the service providers to widows who fell victim to property stripping. These included the chief and the professionally trained service providers in Binga District. The social service providers have accumulated knowledge and experience in providing services to widows who fall victim to property grabbing. They can provide a more objective and non-biased view of the phenomenon of property grabbing, unlike the widows who fell victim to the perpetrators of property grabbing. Social service providers have a balanced view of the phenomenon of property grabbing as they mediate in disputes between the victims and perpetrators on property grabbing.

Sampling method

A purposive sampling method was used to involve five service providers to the widows who experienced property stripping in Sikalenge ward, Binga, Zimbabwe as part of the

study. In the view of Padgett (2008), purposive sampling involves “selecting respondents based on their ability to provide needed information.” This sampling technique guaranteed the involvement of the service providers who intervened to address the ordeal of “property stripping.” The five key informant interview participants were a police officer, a district magistrate, the local chief (Sikalenge), a programme officer for Ntengwe Community Development Trust (a non-governmental gender-based organisation) and the district welfare officer, who have extensive experience through their work in mediation processes and assisting the widows whose property was grabbed. The police officer arrests people violating the inheritance laws; the district magistrate mediates in resolving property inheritance disputes legally; the chief is the most powerful leader contacted in the community when people have property inheritance conflicts; non-governmental gender-based organisations sensitise women to their rights and offer advice, counselling and support; lastly, the district welfare officer intervenes in a variety of social problems and offers support, counselling services and care for the widows, including grants applications for their children.

Data-collection method

In-depth semi-structured interviews (Hennink *et al.*, 2011) were utilised to collect data using an interview schedule as instrument with questions that were formulated on relevant thematic areas. Five participants were interviewed: the community liaison officer (police officer), the district magistrate, the chief, the programmes officer for Ntengwe for Community Development Trust, and the district welfare officer. They have vast experience of the problems of property inheritance experienced by widows in Sikalenge Ward. The interviews conducted were audio recorded so that the researcher could capture all the information provided by the participants of the study.

Data analysis

Analysis of the collected data was done by the researcher by listening to the audio recorded interviews with the participants to infer the meanings of their experiences. Hardwick and Worsely (2011) describe data analysis as “the process of bringing order, structure and meaning” to huge masses of data that the researcher has managed to collect. At a more practical level, the property inheritance problems of the widows were analysed thematically to identify similarities, differences and emerging themes. The kind of thematic data analysis utilised in this study is defined by Whittaker (2012) as data analysis, which involves “identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) in data”.

Ethical considerations

Brynard, Hanekom and Brynard (2014) explain that ethics in research relates to conduct that is ‘right or wrong’ on the part of the researcher, which then serve as guidelines for the evaluation of research conduct. Consistent with the ethical requirements of research, the researcher gained access, sought informed consent, kept information confidential and private, and avoided deception of participants in the study.

The researcher sought permission from the local government, the rural district council, the police and the gender office before conducting interviews with the participants. Furthermore, informed consent (Hardwick & Worsely, 2011) was sought from social

service providers, who were informed about what the study intended to achieve and the approximate time the interviews would take. The participants were informed that participation was voluntary, they could withdraw at any time and that they may choose not to answer some questions during the interviews. Finally, all the participants signed consent forms to participate in the study.

The participants were given anonymous labels, **A, B, C, D** and **E**, to ensure confidentiality. Deception of the participants was avoided in the study as all the necessary information was presented to them.

Limitations of the study

The study successfully managed to gather information from the participants, who had accumulated vast experience in assisting the widows who had been deprived of property. However, the study could not establish first-hand experiences of the widows who were victims of property grabbing. This study focused on the experiences of widows from a peri-urban area, but the experiences of the widows from the deep rural areas and urban area of the district need further exploration to give a fuller picture of the property inheritance experiences of widows in the district.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The findings are discussed thematically below on the basis of the themes that emerged.

Theme one: The causes of property stripping

This theme in the study sought to ascertain the causes of “property stripping” of widows from the service providers’ point of view. The service providers explained that poverty, greed and custom were the root causes of such “property stripping” of the widows.

Poverty

While poverty has many definitions, the economic perspective is that “poverty is a lack of material assets or capital which are integral to households or individuals’ wealth accumulation and security” (Cooper, 2008). Members of the kinship or extended families, so very common in Zimbabwe, rely heavily on a well-off family member for economic support. In the event that such a person dies, they all want to benefit and disallow the widow from taking the property of the deceased.

“[It is caused by] poverty within kinship or extended families. The families within the extended family take advantage of the widow to take property when their relative dies especially when he was the only one working.” (C)

“Mainly property grabbing happens because people need property of the deceased. This is especially so where extended families have been looking to that person as a provider.” (A)

Once the extended families experience poverty, the chances are that they would like to inherit the property of their deceased relative at the expense of the widow and her children. Izumi (2006) agrees with these findings and attests that extended family members have a

tendency to grab property such as livestock and valuable assets from the widows for their own economic gain. Interesting findings were made by Kessy, Mayumana and Msongwe (2010) that the number of children at the time of death of the spouse was a major factor in Tanzania. The more children the couple had at the time of death of the spouse, the higher the chances the widow has of inheriting property. But if the widow had few children at the time of death of her spouse, the chances of being dispossessed of property are higher. The implications of these findings are that property inheritance for widows remains extremely difficult in poverty-stricken areas such as Sikalenge Ward as people eye the property of the deceased. The resources of the deceased normally form a major source of sustenance and hence the widows experience property inheritance problems. This then increases the chances of deepening the levels of poverty among widows in the ward.

Greed

Another factor contributing to stripping property from the widows is greed. Relatives of the deceased husband, such as the in-laws and other extended family members desire to accrue more property. This is in disregard of the fact that this could be the only source of income for the widow. The widow is taken advantage of as a result of her vulnerable and defenceless status. In this situation the tendency is that the in-laws and other perpetrators of “property stripping” are interested in the monetary value of the property and want to accumulate more. The widow and her orphaned children then suffer. With regard to greed, this is what the participants had to say in the study:

“Greediness also is another thing. People may have their own property, but still want to take property from the widow and orphaned children to support their own families.” (C)

“Sometimes they have the property, but they just become greedy and want more even if they do not have the right to do so.” (D)

Similar findings of greed among the in-laws were factors in Makete in Tanzania that saw the widows losing property (Kessy *et al.*, 2010). In-laws usually have their own property, but nevertheless dispossess the widows of their sole source of income and means of sustenance.

Custom

The study found that customary practice was another cause of “property stripping” of the widows. The concept of ‘custom’ has many complex definitions and in this paper it refers to “a set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviours shared by a group of people, but different for each individual, communicated from one generation to the next” (Spencer-Oatey, 2012). Kessy *et al.* (2010) made interesting findings in Makete in Tanzania, where widows are inherited by the relative of the deceased husband (levirate marriage). This is part of the customs of the people. Upon refusal to succumb to the custom of levirate inheritance, the widow is expelled from the home and dispossessed of all property. Similarly, in Sikalenge ward, sharing of property among kinship members upon the death of the owner is a common traditional practice of the Tonga people. The only important thing for property grabbers is their relationship to the deceased rather than to the widow to the late husband. This disregards the point that the widow and even her children need to survive.

Participants in the study also identified the customary practice of bride price, called *luselo* in the Tonga language spoken in the area, as another influencing factor in property grabbing. When a woman gets married and *luselo* is paid for her, the understanding is that she has been acquired as an asset that a man procures. The married woman then joins the marital family with nothing. Should any divorce or death happen, she is expected to rejoin her natural family, leaving behind all accrued property. Participant E had this to say:

“The conception of the in-laws is that SHE CAME WITH NOTHING AND HENCE MUST LEAVE WITH NOTHING!”

Bride price as a cultural practice has been widely condemned by scholars (Chirawu, 2012; Mashiri, 2013; Randall, 2008) for fuelling violence against women in African societies. The practice of bride price has institutionalised cultural violence against women. It has even forced some women to commit suicide as there was no way out of the marriage once bride price has been paid (Winsor, 2015). Bride price reduces the women’s status before her in-laws, even though the natal family might celebrate the “proper marriage” of their daughter in the Zimbabwean context.

Theme two: Views on legal policies and laws that deal with property grabbing

The participants were asked to give their views about existing legal policies that deal with the problem of property grabbing. The participants’ responses were analysed in sub-themes that included implementation of the laws and policies and legal protection from the policies.

Implementation of the laws and policies

Findings indicate that social service providers struggled with the implementation of laws and policies that protect widows from property grabbing. The organisations that implement gender-sensitive programmes indicated dissatisfaction with the implementation of laws and policies that protect widows, more especially in remote areas. Dissatisfaction over implementation included weak dissemination of information in rural areas, coupled with high levels of illiteracy, especially amongst women. Legal frameworks and policies remain office-based paper documents that do not help widows. Officials in headquarters formulate procedures and regulations but the ordinary people are unable to access such information. Participant C noted that:

“Legal policies are there but not being implemented, especially in remote rural areas. The information about the Intestate Succession Law is not disseminated properly, especially considering the fact that most of the people in these remote areas are illiterate. Most of the issues are dealt with at provincial headquarters meaning that the distance involved is very huge. These policies then become not accessible to the people in the rural areas.”

Joireman (2006) noted that many of the difficulties in implementing laws that protect women stem from the use of multiple legal systems in African nations. Most of the legal frameworks applied during the colonial era have not been updated to suit the independent states and remain ambiguous. Furthermore, the writer argues that most of these legal frameworks are costly to implement as new states need resources that are not available. The

implication of having ambiguous laws and polices is that there are many grey areas which are difficult to implement, implying that understanding how they could be justly implemented is dependent on the enforcer. The legal fraternity in Zimbabwe is male-dominated and as such women remain disadvantaged under such patriarchal legal structures.

Sub-theme: Legal protection

The study gauged the extent of satisfaction of the service providers regarding the ability of the laws to protect widows from property grabbing. It was evident that legal frameworks exist and should protect women from property grabbing by their in-laws. This was evident from the district magistrate's views when he pointed out that property grabbing is equated to theft and perpetrators receive punishment of two years imprisonment (at the time the study was conducted). This kind of punishment conforms to objective IV of the Gender Policy of the Republic of Zimbabwe (2013) that seeks to "reduce all forms of gender-based violence in Zimbabwe" and calls for "the strengthening of the institutional and legal capacity to deal with gender violence, inheritance and property rights".

The chief in Binga indicated that current state laws at least help to curtail an enormous number of property-grabbing cases in the community. The chief mentioned that without these laws the inheritance issues would be even higher. The district welfare officer brought to light another angle to the problem of property grabbing, indicating that the laws are there to protect the people; the problem is that people are unaware of the laws and sometimes are afraid to report cases of property grabbing. The district welfare officer had this to say:

"Law is clear on property grabbing. It is regarded as theft. Laws are many that try to curtail property grabbing but it still happens in the African culture." (B)

This view was also endorsed by another respondent:

"Policies and laws are there in Zimbabwe, a lot of them. ... But in as much as these laws and policies are there, the people of Binga community are either unaware of them, or are afraid to come and report cases of property grabbing." (E)

Whilst the legal instruments are in place to protect women from property grabbing, the phenomenon still exists. This indicates that law enforcement alone may not be the best response to the challenges faced by widows in Sikalenge ward. A more coordinated multidisciplinary approach is proposed which would also take into account the social dynamics of the people in the ward. Joireman (2006) admits that even though legal frameworks exist to protect women in Africa, the social problems are many and merit exceptional attention.

Theme three: Help offered to the widows facing the problem of property grabbing

The participants in this study also revealed various forms of interventions that they offer to widows who fall victims of property grabbing in Sikalenge ward. The study gathered that three forms of help were offered to the widows, namely education, advice and counselling.

Sub-theme: Education

Education was offered mainly by a gender-based non-governmental organisation (NGO) called Ntengwe for Community Development Trust. The main focus of the educational themes of the NGO was property inheritance. The NGO used awareness campaigns throughout Binga District. Education through awareness campaigns offer the widows information about women's inheritance rights. Service providers realised that the community had little information on inheritance matters. This is what participant C had to say:

“We do awareness raising among women so that they can also go out to also raise awareness on property and inheritance issues. We also allow success stories to be told in workshops so that others can learn from the story.”

Both national and international NGOs have scored successes in reaching the peri-urban and rural population of Binga, Zimbabwe. One essential role of the NGO sector, among many other roles, involves facilitating the exchange of information, training of leaders in people's organisations, and promoting working together with state departments as well as other donor agencies on policy issues (Global Coalition on Women, 2007). They are an essential avenue for service delivery to the rural communities. In Zimbabwe the NGO sector is strictly under surveillance because of allegations of their political agitation for regime change agendas. This has a significant impact on essential services such as information dissemination by the NGO sector in poor communities, where government resources may not be sufficient. This is a significant drawback for service delivery in remote areas and communities such as Sikalenge ward of Binga District.

Sub-theme: Advice

The service providers offer advisory platforms to widows whose property was grabbed. This advice helps widows on how to repossess their property. Ways to safeguard property that has not yet been grabbed is also part of the advice given to widows. This is what one participant had to say:

“We also offer advice on how those who have fallen victims to property grabbing can return [regain] their lost property.” (C)

Gender-based NGOs also help women with advice on writing a will. Whilst writing a will is an important measure to safeguard property against grabbing, many people in Sikalenge are unaware of the process of writing a will. Furthermore, writing a will is associated with taboos in Zimbabwe. People therefore desist from writing wills as death is a subject hardly talked about. Pfumorodze (2010) is of the opinion that there is a need for massive advocacy work to demystify writing a will. Pfumorodze (2010) warns that heirs nominated in wills need to be chosen carefully as others can still misuse the property or sell it, leaving the widow and surviving children in poverty. The NGOs indicated making a special effort to form community watchdogs to safeguard widows and their children from property grabbing.

Sub-theme: Counselling

The Social Service Department indicated that victims of property grabbing are offered counselling services. Apparently perpetrators and victims are brought together to create

dialogue and understanding between the parties. When asked whether they offered counselling to victims of property grabbing, the participants had this to say:

“As a Social Service Department, we offer family casework. We call all the concerned parties and try to talk to them and enlighten them on the problem. If that does not produce results we refer them to the magistrate.” (E)

“We actually help by calling the two parties and explain to them the law of inheritance. We tell them that there is no need to fight over property because the remaining spouse should inherit property and take care of the orphaned children.” (A)

Counselling has a significant role in social work practice. Saleeby (2009) suggests that counselling can rejuvenate the strengths of individuals.

Bringing victims and perpetrators together for counselling sessions has been criticised by Bray (2014) as it triggers trauma for the victim. While interventions by defenders of the law such as police and magistrates are a major step towards prevention of property grabbing, Danis (2006) is adamant that this approach does not guarantee the safety of the victims and can precipitate retaliation by the perpetrator. This approach lacks the cultural sensitivity inherent in Sikalenge.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK INTERVENTION

This paper has indicated that “property stripping” is a huge problem among widows in Sikalenge ward. Despite the fact that this ward is close to the urban area where information on property inheritance is abundant, women still fall prey to property grabbing. Whilst this study gathered significant information from the service providers on property grabbing, many dynamics of property grabbing need further exploration. The views of the victims may pinpoint the magnitude of the problem of property grabbing among widows and explore significant dynamics of the phenomenon.

Significant factors that contribute to property grabbing have been identified as poverty, greed and cultural customs. Because of poverty, people in Sikalenge ward have few resources for their sustenance. Fighting for the resources of the deceased is inevitable and results in property grabbing that leaves widows with nothing. Poverty was overlooked by radical feminist theorists in the explanation of violence against women. There is need to identify poverty as one factor that contributes to violence against women, especially in the Sikalenge context.

Pragmatically, it is recommended that social workers engage communities in community development and income-generating projects as poverty-alleviation strategies. This could reduce dependence on the deceased person’s property and resources, and reduce the impetus to dispossess the widows of property.

Greed was one of the factors that the study established as a contributing factor to property stripping. This is despite the fact that perpetrators had enough resources as opposed to the widows, who were dependent upon the deceased husband’s property. The conclusion reached is that greed influences people to be insensitive. The need to

accumulate more resources has led in-laws to grab property from widows, thereby entrenching a culture of violence against widows.

It is recommended that social workers establish community committees to monitor acts of greed among community members to prevent the scourge of violence against widows. Where in-laws become greedy to an extent that they strip widows of their property, they should then be brought before a community court to curb institutionalised violence, as the culture of violence theory contends.

The study concludes that custom plays an equally significant factor in contributing to property stripping. The customs and traditions of the Tonga people allow kinship members to share the property of the deceased person against the will of the surviving widow. Cultural theorists criticised this as institutionalised violence against women in the African communities.

This study recommends that the services offered to widows be scaled up to meet the needs of all the widows. Moreover, a coherent social work intervention model to deal with property stripping among widows is needed to provide stronger preventative and mitigation services.

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