

Abstract

This systematic review employs a socio-ecological framework to investigate the challenges that arise due to early spousal loss. The research team conducted a systematic review of studies published between 2013 and 2023 to uncover factors that influence the grieving process in bereaved spouses. The results reveal that concurrent with the grief and devastation associated with partner loss, young widows and widowers also face a harsh reality filled with secondary losses, financial difficulty, mental health distress, emotional anguish, and identity crises. These hardships are exacerbated by social norms that disenfranchise the grief of young widows and widowers. These norms are then enacted interpersonally and codified in policy. The review's findings underscore the necessity for increased community grief education and support, focused clinical attention, and policy advocacy.

Keywords: premature widowhood, young widowhood, systematic review, bereavement

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A socioecological examination of the challenges associated with young widowhood: A systematic review

The death of a spouse can be considered one of the most profound losses in a person's life (Anderson et al., 2023). Because widowhood is unexpected early in life, younger widows and widowers (defined as 50 and below) tend to experience more difficulties adjusting to their partners' death (Anderson et al., 2023). Due to the interconnected nature of life partners and the lack of preparation in younger widowhood, adjusting to partner loss often means young widows must navigate their own grief and mental health issues, struggle with existential questions about their identity and potentially lengthy future without their spouse, raise grieving, dependent children (Anderson et al., 2023), navigate relationships with in-laws (Hochman et al., 2022), and often deal with social welfare, financial, educational and legal systems (Garcini et al., 2021). Furthermore, since the loss of a partner encompasses a wide range of unknown secondary losses and difficulties, young widows may find that certain aspects of their grief are disenfranchised. To understand the problems young widows encounter, examining these challenges within a framework that recognizes the multiple facets of an individual's life and how their systems influence them is essential. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) could clarify and structure an understanding of the complexities associated with young widowhood.

Theory

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory purports that human development is affected by the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. The microsystem comprises the individual's characteristics and the people with whom they interact daily, while the mesosystem includes the interactions between microsystems. The exosystem comprises the policies that create or limit opportunities for the individual, and the macrosystem refers to the

customs and beliefs of a particular society that also affect individuals (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner's socioecological theory was initially intended to explain the effects of the social environment on human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979); however, it has been used to understand other issues affected by societal structures, including enhancing an understanding of fathers' grief in pregnancy loss (Obst et al., 2020).

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory provides an organizing framework for understanding the literature that examines the enduring consequences of young widowhood and may be able to guide the direction of future research. In the only systematic review including young widows, Anderson, and colleagues (2023) included studies published in the Western context from 2001-2022 and examined the challenges and factors influencing adjustment in young widowhood. Young widows described the difficulty of partner death as an unexpected loss, the loss of future hopes and dreams accompanying partner death, the challenges of becoming single parents, and identity changes. Additionally, young widows describe experiencing severe and debilitating physical and psychological distress associated with grief and loss (Anderson et al., 2023). Their study also found that young widows coped by maintaining a purpose for their lives through child caregiving or employment. Additionally, spiritual beliefs and social and professional support helped young widows adapt to their loss (Anderson et al., 2023).

This current study will extend previous research by using the socioecological theory to frame the challenges experienced in the lives of widows and widowers globally with the following research question: What are the challenges young widows and widowers face around the world?

Method

Data sources and search strategy

The team used the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) guidelines to systematically search five online databases in May of 2023 (CINAHL, Academic Search Complete, APA Psych, MedLine, Soc Index). In consultation with university librarians, the team conducted preliminary searches to decide on keywords. The following keywords were used: ("dating" OR "courtship" OR "girlfriend" OR "boyfriend" OR "widowhood" OR "widow" OR "loss of spouse" OR "bereaved adult") AND ("adaptation, psychological" OR "bereavement" OR "grief" OR "loss" OR "mourning" OR "disenfranchised grief") AND ("death" OR "sudden death" OR "unexpected death" OR "unanticipated death") NOT ("older" OR "older adult" OR "elderly" OR "geriatric" OR "over 65"). Google, Google Scholar, and reference lists of included studies were scanned for additional articles.

Study Selection and Analysis

Inclusion criteria were English language, qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method studies published between 2013-2023, focused on challenges of life-partner loss of participants with a mean age of under 50. Exclusion criteria included non-English language studies and reviews that did not report primary data, such as systematic reviews and meta-analyses.

The research team used Rayyan, a systematic review online program that removes duplicates and facilitates the review process among research teams (Ouzzani et al., 2016). Figure 1 demonstrates the screening process and study yield. The only mixed method study met partial criteria by reporting the results of widows above the age of 50 but very clearly distinguishing between those aged 50 and below (Lancaster & Johnson, 2020). Scanning through articles' references yielded no additional articles; however, a qualitative study that was published in

August of 2023 was also added to the review. The study quality of relevant articles was assessed using the Critical Appraisal Skills Program (CASP) quality appraisal checklist.

INSERT FIGURE 1

Qualitative Data Synthesis

The team used thematic synthesis to analyze the qualitative studies (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Thematic synthesis considers any reported quote in the results or findings of the articles as raw data to be analyzed to base findings on the participants' experiences. The team used Dedoose to combine all the quotes into a new raw data set and then created a deductive codebook based on the socioecological model to conduct line-by-line, descriptive, theoretical analysis. The research team organized the codes using elements of the socio-ecological theory (individual, interpersonal, community-level, and policy) and then created subgroups under the applicable sections. The results from the qualitative studies were combined with pertinent findings from quantitative articles.

Results

INSERT TABLE 1

Quality of included studies

Quality was assessed for each study using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme's (CASP) Tool (CASP, 2023). Thirteen (13) qualitative studies were reviewed, and one (1) mixed-methods study was reviewed. Study quality varied; however, the overall quality of the studies was acceptable. Except for three studies (Bokek-Cohen, 2014; Bandini & Thompson, 2013; Shorer et al., 2021), all used convenience, purposive, or snowball sampling. One study did not specify how the participants were recruited (Motsoeneng, 2022).

Four of the fourteen studies reviewed did not address any ethical considerations (Motsoeneng, 2022; Holmgren, 2021; Azeez et al., 2023; Wehrman, 2019). The remaining nine articles either discussed receiving approval from a university (Mundaden & Tungol, 2021; Bokek-Cohen, 2014; Jones et al., 2019; Shorer et al., 2021; Segev et al., 2021; Leichtentritt et al., 2013; Lancaster & Johnson, 2017) or detailed the informed consent process and measures to protect confidentiality (Bandini & Thompson, 2013; Narendra, 2023; Leichtentritt et al., 2013; Lancaster & Johnson, 2017). The qualitative studies each identified a clear statement of research aims and the research study's significance. To ensure the rigor of the studies, the researchers utilized member checks (Mundaden & Tungol, 2021; Motsoeneng, 2022; Narendra, 2023; Wehrman, 2019), triangulation (Mundaden & Tungol, 2021; Bokek-Cohen, 2014;), and structural analysis (Jones et al., 2019). Of the three published quantitative papers, two originate from the same original study with widowed fathers who lost their partners to cancer and utilized the following scales in both studies: the Kansas Parenting Satisfaction Scale, Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale, Texas Inventory for Grief Scale, and the Psychological Adaptation Scale, (Yopp et al., 2015; Yopp et al., 2019).

Findings

The qualitative studies examined the experiences of a diverse group of bereaved individuals, including widows in India (Azeez et al., 2023; Mundaden & Tungol, 2021; Narendra, 2023), widows of Israeli military/police (Bokek-Cohen 2014; Leichtentritt et al., 2013; Segev et al., 2021; Shorer et al., 2021), widows of US military servicemen (Wehrman, 2019), bereaved fathers (Holmgren, 2021), and young widows in South Africa (Motsoeneng, 2022) and in the United States (Jones et al., 2019). Most of the studies focused on microsystem factors (i.e.,

personal and interpersonal issues) that adversely affect young widowhood, followed by mesosystem (i.e., community-level factors) and exosystem (i.e., policy) factors.

Microsystem factors

Identity shift

Young widows acknowledged a spouse's integral role in shaping identity and giving meaning to their lives (Azeez et al., 2023; Bandini & Thompson, 2013; Holmgren, 2021; Taylor & Robinson, 2016; Wehrman, 2019). After their spouse's death, they described the difficulty they encountered in understanding who they were without this relationship: "You're fired as a wife, basically lost your job as a wife...Somehow you saw yourself through that person, and so when they're not there you can't see yourself" (Wehrman, 2019, p. 586). Losing their partners was akin to losing an essential part of the self: "Almost I feel like a part of my body was cut down" (Bandini & Thompson, 2013, p. 132). The loss of a spouse thrust young widows into existential dread as they questioned the purpose of their existence without their partner: "Initial days after his death, I found my life meaningless. I thought about why I should live now. Gradually, I realized I have to live, work, and survive for my children" (Azeez et al., 2023, p.8).

Financial difficulties

Prematurely widowed people tend to be unprepared for the loss and are in a developmental stage with greater responsibilities. In their mixed-method study, Lancaster and Johnson (2020) found that 69% (n=500) of people who lost their partner were financially or practically unprepared for bereavement. In this study, a little over half (52%) of young widows under 50 (n=200) lost their partners suddenly and experienced the most significant financial impact and practical changes. In this group of 50 or below, 63% still worked full-time, 53% had children under 18, and 47% were still paying a mortgage. In five qualitative studies, participants

discussed the difficulties and stress widows faced in keeping up with their financial responsibilities after the loss of their partners (Mundaden & Tungol, 2021; Motsoeneng, 2022; Azeez et al., 2023; Jones et al., 2019; Narendra, 2023).

Parenting stressors

Parenting with dependent children is fraught with parenting insecurity, the hardship of raising a grieving child, and fear of death (Holmgren, 2021; Bandini & Thompson, 2013; Wehrman, 2019). With the loss of a co-parent, young widows and widowers described how they lost their co-parent's support in the role they used to play:

That part of my life I had to change was how I parented my children. I could no longer say, 'Wait until your father gets home. Let me discuss that with your father. I'd rather not go there. That's something your father can help you with.' I had to be Hitler and Mother Teresa in the same breath, whereas before, I was a loving mother. And it really hurt my children (Wehrman, 2019, p. 587).

In addition to losing support for their role with their dependent children, widowed parents are also forced to take on the responsibilities and role of the other parent. This left them struggling with feelings of insufficiency and insecurity as parents: "The kids don't have a mama. Well, I got to play the dual role. Well, I'm a lousy mama" (Bandini & Thompson, 2013, p. 133). Joyous occasions become mixed with the grief of witnessing the void in their children's lives: "For me, it's a loss again of everything my little girl does, or if she does something special and parents are there, her first communion or what-not, there's always that void." (Wehrman, 2019, p.588). Young widows and widowers also endorsed hypervigilance for their well-being because they understood the frightening implications for their children if they were to die: "I am aware that I really have to look after myself, because I have to be there for them. It would almost be a worst-case scenario if something serious happened to me. [Then] they just would not have any [parents] (Holmgren, 2021, p.135).

The emotional and mental health burden of loss

Young widows and widowers described significant emotional and mental health suffering when they lost their partner. Bereaved widows and widowers were left to contend with excruciating loneliness after the death of their partners (Bandini & Thompson, 2013; Narendra, 2023; Jones et al., 2019; Leichtentritt et al., 2013) and particularly described the physical loneliness of losing touch and intimacy (Motsoeneng, 2022).

From a life span perspective, when a young person loses their partner, they typically anticipate a considerable period before their death. Young widows and widowers expressed their horror at the length of time they must live without their partner: "... how do I go thirty or forty years without this person who was my soulmate, my best friend and confidant, everything? How do I go so long, statistically, so long without him?" (Jones et al., 2019, p.189). Because plans and goals are often intertwined with their deceased partners, widows and widowers, described feeling as though their hopes and dreams died with their partners, adding to the tragedy of their loss:

We were that close to him retiring and then settling down and getting our dream home and putting down roots and planting a tree. That is what we always joked about. The first tree I ever planted, the first piece of property I ever paid off, has been at the cemetery. I lost our dreams, so that changed. I was adrift without even a goal anymore or a dream (Wehrman, 2019, p.588).

Young widows and widowers also described difficulties with various manifestations of mental health distress, such as physical somatization (Falk et al., 2021) trauma symptoms (Holmgren, 2021; Bandini & Thompson, 2013; Motsoeneng, 2022; Mundaden & Tungol, 2021; Azeez et al., 2023; Falk et al., 2021; Taylor & Robinson, 2016), anxiety (Mundaden & Tungol, 2021; Falk et al., 2021), depression (Azeez et al., 2023; Yopp et al., 2019; Falk et al., 2021), prolonged grief, and suicidal ideation (Mundaden & Tungol, 2021; Falk et al., 2021; Yopp et al., 2019) in the aftermath of partner loss.

Falk et al. (2021) found that 40% of a sample of 42 widowed parents in Sweden experienced symptoms of post-traumatic stress two to four years after the death of their partners. Trauma symptoms reported in qualitative studies included intrusions, insomnia (Holmgren, 2021), numbing through substance use (Bandini & Thompson, 2013), hyperarousal (Motsoeneng, 2022), helplessness (Azeez et al., 2023), and negative cognitions (Jones et al., 2019). Young, bereaved partners described feeling haunted by intrusive thoughts of the death story: “the last stretch of time [before her death] and the final course of events haunted me a lot in the beginning” (Holmgren, 2021, p.133). Participants in the studies discussed an inability to sleep after losing a partner: “I also slept poorly for a long time” (Holmgren, 2021, p. 133), and needing to use substances to cope: “One thing that helped me is to drink...I drink, I go to sleep. I wake up, it’s right back on my mind. But I, at least I can go to sleep when I’m drinking” (Bandini & Thompson, 2013, p. 135). Participants also endorsed negative cognitions: “Life doesn’t feel like a gift anymore. It feels like an obligation” (Jones et al., 2019, p.189).

Yopp and colleagues’ (2019) study on the depressive symptoms of 259 bereaved widowers within the first two years of bereavement found that starting at three months, about 86% of the sample exceeded the threshold for clinically significant depressive symptoms. This was still true for 58% of the sample at year one and almost half of the sample (45%) at the two-year mark. Participants in the studies described the experience of depressive symptoms: “I was depressed. I cried for many days, didn’t eat, and sleep. I couldn’t understand what was happening. I realized I lost him...I lost all hope” (Azeez et al., 2023, p. 4).

Mirroring the findings on depression, one study found that grief intensity ebbed but remained high at the two-year mark for almost half of the young widowers in the study (Yopp et al., 2019), while another study found that 12% of the young, widowed sample met the cutoff

score on a measure screening for Prolonged Grief Disorder (PGD) (Falk et al., 2021). Young widows in India experienced various symptoms of PGD, such as somatic symptoms, pervasive and intense emotional pain, and nihilistic feelings as they faced an uncertain future without their partners: “I cannot do anything, I think, I am tensed about my future because it seems tough for me to go on without my husband” (Mundaden & Tungol, 2021, p. 418).

Interpersonal challenges in the Microsystem and Mesosystem

Young widows encountered a variety of interpersonal challenges ranging from inaction (Wehrman, 2019; Holmgren, 2021; Bandini & Thompson, 2013; Jones et al., 2019; Mundaden, 2021) to being subjected to violations of privacy, control, exploitation, and accusations (Narendra, 2023; Motsoeneng, 2022; Segev, 2021; Azeez et al., 2023). These interpersonal difficulties increased their experience of emotional suffering, leaving them feeling alone and besieged. A young widower described his surprise at the lack of concern he felt from others after he lost his wife:

“...it would have been nice if someone had knocked on the door and asked: Is everything okay here? Is something the matter, or are you doing alright? I would probably have said: No, I can manage, but it would have been nice if someone had checked. Somebody else out there in a similar situation might easily have crashed” (Holmgren, 2021, p. 138).

Because they are often the only ones in their friend group who have experienced a loss of this magnitude, young widows also sense their friends’ discomfort in listening to them process their grief and loss: “I almost feel like they’re uncomfortable with it because they don’t know how to deal with it...” (Jones et al., 2019, p. 188). Similarly, another widow said, “...It is better to be alone. Here, I have no friends. Nobody can understand my difficulty...” (Mundaden, 2021, p. 419).

Not only do young widows experience a lack of support from their loved ones, but they also are ostracized at times. Young widows in the United States described how their relationships with other military wives were severed after their partner's death:

It was kind of like I had one foot in and one foot out. All the [military] wives pretty much cut me off immediately...It was really despicable how I was treated. I had absolutely no support from where he was stationed at and the people that he worked with (Wehrman, 2019, p. 587).

Young widows also reported boundary violations and controlling behavior they experienced in their communities such as intense scrutiny from friends and family (Narendra, 2023; Motsoeneng, 2022; Segev, 2021). Young widows in India described how they were closely watched: "Everyone looks at me... what am I doing?... To whom am I interacting? My family members and my neighbours stalk everything" (Narendra, 2023, p. 14). A young widow in Israel also described the intense scrutiny she faced daily from family members:

It went and escalated. All year 'round they checked all your movements, what you're doing, what you're not doing, get into your affairs, where's the money, where's this, where's that, such questions that, really, why ask them in the first place? (Widow, age 46) (Segev, 2021, p. 51).

The suspicion directed against widows was typically related to fear of immoral behavior. A young widow in South Africa described being unable to attend parties or dress as elaborately as is customary because of the suspicions cast on her by married women in her community:

When you attend an occasion, you dress to kill. I do not attend parties and gathering anymore. You hear this woman gossiping around you, 'what does [she] think... the men in this occasion are taken... I will kill her[.] I cannot believe she has the guts to hunt for a man'. Now I do not have to dress beautifully because I am a widow (Motsoeneng, 2022, p. 81).

Due to these suspicions, young widows were restricted from interacting with people outside the family. This included not being allowed to work, which significantly limited young

widows' financial possibilities: "I am restricted by my family whether I can do a job or not... after I lost my husband. They suspected me and did not allow for this" (Narendra, 2023, p. 14).

Young widows also described being scapegoated for the death of their husbands (Azeez et al., 2023; Segev et al., 2021). An Israeli widow described finding out that she was accused of her husband's death during the mourning rites:

At the Shiva [the seven days of mourning in Judaism], when they accused me that he died because of me... I don't know how they came up with this. And they spoke about me, which caused me to break it off, finish the Shiva, and escape from there (Segev et al., 2021, p. 51).

Macrosystem

Macrosystem factors include societal norms, which vary by setting and community and cause hardships for widows (Mir et al., 2023; Wehrman, 2019; Azeez et al., 2023; Motsoeneng, 2022). The common thread among community factors was that these norms are enacted in interpersonal relationships and through policies, and these adversely affected young widows by ostracizing, disenfranchising, and even violating their human rights.

Young widows described social norms to which they were subjected once their partners died. For example, young American military widows described their experience of dual loss once they were no longer welcomed in the circles of military families after their partners' deaths.

Although young widows cognitively understood that their membership was contingent on their partners being in the military, it was an emotionally challenging experience:

We do miss the military lifestyle. There's a sense of camaraderie for the guys, and you're part of something unique and special, and [then] you're no longer a part of it. It makes sense. It's not like you can change that because the person who's in the actual military is no longer there, so it makes sense that you would sever those ties. So, not only the loss of your spouse but then the loss of that type of lifestyle that you're meeting other people (Wehrman, 2019, p. 587).

Young widows in India described restrictive and oppressive cultural norms and rites of passage they were compelled to undertake when widowed. These overt societal norms codified

the disenfranchisement of grief in young widows by creating an extra layer of difficulty for young widows while withdrawing support:

I was asked to leave the village and stay in a broken house made of bricks on the outskirts of the village. Every widow had to stay in that house for six months, and then we had to go to the pilgrimage site barefoot. Rather than his death, these customs traumatized me (Azeez et al., 2023, p. 6).

When my husband died, suddenly, I was banned from everything. Both my parents as well as my in-laws imposed restrictions on me. They said, 'You must avoid dressing like an ordinary woman, wearing gold ornaments, and/or attending marriage ceremonies.' The community members, mostly women, often taunted me verbally if they saw me going out or dressed like them. At times, this created a sense of isolation and made me deeply excluded (Mir et al., 2023, p. 985).

Due to social norms against remarriage, young widows in India were prohibited from being able to address the problem of loneliness by seeking a new romantic partnership:

Sometimes, I feel lonely and think about the meaning of my life. I feel things could be better if I married again. Then, I start thinking about what others will think about me. Moreover, who will take care of my two children? The new groom and his family will not accept them. My family will also neglect them. Because of these, I can't think of a remarriage (Azeez et al., 2023, p. 7).

Young widows in South Africa were viewed as having more sexual interest than other women. Consequently, they were eyed with suspicion by women in the community: "Widows have more sexual desire than married women, which is why we have to keep an eye on them, not to steal our husbands" (Motsoeneng, 2022, p. 79). While this social belief was not overtly discussed in the other studies, it was present in how young widows were treated in India (Azeez et al., 2023; Narendra, 2023; Segev et al., 2021).

The primacy of marital status is a societal norm with which unmarried Israeli young widows contended when they lost their life partners. Because they were not married at the time of the death, these young widows discussed how their grief was overlooked and disenfranchised by community members:

...I was the person of closeness to him. While he was alive, everyone accepted that... As long as he was alive, I was perceived as his intimate, close partner. The moment he died, the relationship I had, which people used to acknowledge and support, no longer existed! (Leichtentritt et al, 2013, p. 812)

Exosystem

While there is less inclusion of policy issues in the included articles, young widows discussed policies around death notifications and remarriage that mirror community norms. For example, young widows in Israel described how government policies prioritized blood or legal relationships over emotionally intimate and close ones. This was evident in the process of death notifications, wherein the girlfriends of fallen Israeli soldiers were not notified of the loss directly:

At six o'clock in the morning, my phone rang. It was a friend of mine who usually doesn't call at that hour. I asked her "what happened to Dan?" Dan was her boyfriend at the time. She told me that Dan is fine and asked if I heard what happened at night...I immediately realized! I threw the phone up in the air and started running and screaming...I ran like crazy, barefoot, shouting and crying in the military base [where I was stationed] ...I went to the "war room" and yelled at the people there to tell me what happened. They couldn't say a thing...They just raised the volume of the radio and there on the news I heard his name (Leichtentritt et al., 2013, p.813).

In another study, Israeli widows explored their anger around policies that dictated survivor benefits. The participants in this study were military young widows who had remarried and lost survivor benefits. At some point, the benefits were reinstated, and this study explored the feelings of the participants in the aftermath of the reinstatement:

In the past, I needed the money. And today—what do I need it for? I don't want the connection with the Families Division, I don't want their money, I don't want anything. I didn't want to go back to being a widow, I didn't want to go back at all. It just didn't fit with where I am (Shorer et al., 2021, p. 1386).

Discussion

This is the first study to use the socioecological model to examine the hardship faced by young widows and widowers around the world, and it presented a coherent picture of the magnitude and profundity of the challenges in the lives of young widows. The systematic review drew from international studies, yet the themes revealed many similarities in young widows' lived experiences, particularly in their personal and interpersonal challenges. As Anderson and colleagues (2023) found, young widows and widowers contend with severe psychological distress in dealing with partner loss, such as loneliness, identity crises, and parenting difficulties. Extending to the previous systematic review's findings (Anderson et al., 2023), this review also identified financial hardship and a qualitative description of widespread symptoms of mental health distress that could fall into categories of symptoms of diagnoses such as trauma, anxiety, and depression. Quantitative studies showed that grief intensity, depression, anxiety, and trauma symptoms were present for about half of the sample at least up to two years after partner loss (Yopp et al., 2019; Falk et al., 2021).

Not identified in Anderson and colleagues' study (2023), many of the young widows' and widowers' relational challenges were shaped by community norms and enacted interpersonally to the detriment of young widows and widowers. The role of community norms is also apparent in policies. For example, the explicit social norms against remarriage described by young widows in India (Azeez et al., 2023) were not discussed in the studies with Israeli widows (Shorer et al., 2021). However, until recently, Israeli military widows lost survivor benefits upon remarriage, underlying the idea that policy reflects implicit social norms that disenfranchise young widows and widowers even when they are not explicitly stated as community norms.

Implications for practice

Practitioners who work with young widows should understand the differences and similarities between the experiences of loss of young widows versus their older counterparts. Young widows may experience psychological distress and physical and mental health difficulties long after their partner's death, a marked difference from the pattern of adjustment of older widows who are largely able to return to pre-loss functioning within months of partner death (Bonanno et al., 2002; Mancini et al., 2011). The most prevalent expression of emotional suffering in these studies was loneliness, which is similar to findings among older widows (Utz et al., 2014). Importantly, Pitman et al. (2020) found that loneliness was the most essential mediator for suicidal ideation post-bereavement. Consequently, helping young widows and widowers strengthen their social network should be an essential goal for treatment for clinicians.

Additionally, clinicians should validate the intensity and duration of young widows' grief, appreciating the complexity of such a profound loss and accompanying secondary losses. As opposed to experiences of older widowhood, young widowhood is always the result of an untimely death; therefore, clinicians should watch for complications of traumatic grief such as substance use disorders, PTSD, depression, anxiety, and prolonged grief disorder in young widows and distinguish between acute grief and early signs of mental health distress, which could lead to a disorder. This will require clinicians to develop a solid understanding of the nuances of grief and develop expertise with differential diagnoses. Clinicians should also provide psychoeducation about the toll of grief on the body and encourage clients to seek medical attention routinely as part of their grief self-care.

Clinicians should employ a systems lens when working with members of the young, widowed community, understanding that the well-being of children is inextricably tied to the well-being of their parents. It is essential to provide specialized support to parents who have

become widowed, offering practical help and opportunities for acquiring practical skills. This is especially important because these bereaved parents are often responsible for raising a grieving child exposed to traumatic loss.

Support systems for young widows and widowers within communities must recognize that young widows often encounter various human rights violations in the form of hostility, breaches of personal boundaries, and suspicion. Although human rights violations of widows may vary depending on the cultural context, they are still pervasive as evinced by several United Nations (UN) actions in the past two decades. First, in 2010 the UN proclaimed the observance of International Day of the Widow on June 23rd of every year to draw attention to the plight and oppression of widows around the world (United Nations General Assembly, 2011). Additionally, the UN General Assembly adopted a UN Resolution on widowhood in 2022 (Kremin, 2015). This legislation was enacted to combat practices that oppress widows through various means such as disinheritance and economic and social exclusion.

Drawing from the UN General Assembly Declaration of Human Rights, “No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honour and reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks” (United Nations General Assembly, 1948, Article 12 section, para. 1). Widows in Israel and in India discussed being surveilled by family and neighbors and also blamed for their husband’s death, and similar intrusions were also reported in an unpublished study among young widows in the United States (Barros-Lane et al., 2023) demonstrating that these violations may be more widespread than has been recorded in the literature. In this present study, widows in India reported exclusion from community rituals, violating Article 27 which states, “Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life

of the community...” whereas military widows in the United States have similarly faced challenges maintaining access to their partners’ military communities (United Nations General Assembly, 1948, Article 27 section, para. 2). In an unpublished study, Barros-Lane and colleagues (2023) also found that young widows in the United States reported that their husband’s family robbed them of their husband’s property, violating Article 17 which prohibits arbitrary deprivation of property (United Nations General Assembly, 1948).

Given that these challenges are rooted in societal norms, engaging in community education and advocacy is imperative to help support systems comprehend the profound impact of losing a partner and the specific forms of support required. Lastly, governmental policies significantly influence the experience of grievers and have far-reaching consequences on the severity of grief and the outcome for the bereaved. Practitioners should advocate for trauma- and grief-informed policies, reducing suffering and supporting young widows’ ability to move forward.

Limitations and future research

Although this review used studies from international settings, only English-language studies were included. Therefore, this should not be considered an exhaustive or definitive portrayal of young widowhood. Based on the review, there are several recommendations for future research studies. Future research should examine how policies promulgate structural oppression for this vulnerable group and how these policies are driven by values that devalue and disenfranchise widows and widowers. Because human rights violations sometimes occur outside of legal structures (within the confines of interpersonal interactions and microaggressions), future research should examine how these occur around the world. Additionally, there seems to be a gendered difference in how widows are treated versus their widower counterparts. This may

be because some studies focused solely on female participants; however, further research is needed to examine these gender dynamics. Furthermore, adopting a systems-oriented perspective for a research agenda would likely encompass studies evaluating the impact of community education and policy advocacy on the global well-being of individuals experiencing grief.

Conclusion

Young widows and widowers face tremendous challenges across domains and over an extended period. Some of the suffering in young widowhood is unavoidable, requiring community support and, at times, professional intervention. However, some of the suffering described in the review is avoidable, as with interpersonal, community norms, and policy factors. Understanding the aspects of avoidable suffering gives essential insight into areas for intervention. As Attig wrote, "...there is suffering that humans impose or visit upon each other and on themselves that can be eliminated, or at least minimized. People are responsible for such suffering; they have it within their power to avoid imposing it" (2004, p.202). The review findings suggest that strengthening family relationships, raising grief awareness in the community, and examining the effects of relevant policies may be instrumental in decreasing the challenges for people who have lost a life partner prematurely.

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