'Sleeping With My Dead Husband's Brother!': The Impact of HIV and AIDS on Widowhood and Widow Inheritance in Kampala, Uganda

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CHAPTER 12

'Sleeping with my dead husband's brother!' The impact of HIV and AIDS on widowhood and widow inheritance in Kampala, Uganda

Stella Nyanzi, Margaret Emodu-Walakira and Wilberforce Serwaniko

Introduction

As death rates escalate due to the HIV and AIDS epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa, so do the numbers of widows and widowers (Barnett and Whiteside, 2002; De Cock et al., 2002; Hunter, 2003; Kalipeni et al., 2004). According to the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS and the World Health Organization (UNAIDS/WHO, 2006), an estimated 24.5 million adults and children were living with HIV in sub-Saharan Africa at the end of 2005. In the same year, an estimated 2 million people died from AIDS-related illnesses. While there are statistics of those orphaned due to HIV and AIDS (an estimate of 12 million African children), no recent data exist about widowhood. However, earlier studies (Ntozi, 1997; Potash, 1986) reported widowhood rates in some contexts to be as high as 1 in 4 adult women.

There is also a lack of knowledge about the experience of widowhood in sub-Saharan Africa since the advent of HIV and AIDS. According to Potash (1986, p. 1), even 'the limited treatment given to widowhood has focussed on the wrong questions'. In scholarly discourse, advocacy and public policy, widows are variously referred to as invisible, excluded, marginalized, secluded, neglected, dependent, vulnerable, peripheral, outcasts, disempowered and reclusive.[1] Even where scholarly attention has been paid to this subject, Obbo (1986, p. 91, 86) contends that 'the women's point of view is muted' and that 'much of the literature focuses on norms, and little mention is made of actual practice'.

This chapter focuses on contemporary practices and values attached to widowhood and widow inheritance in Uganda. It explores the gendered nature of the widowhood experience in the context of the HIV and AIDS pandemic and examines the gender dimensions of contemporary widow inheritance among Baganda.[2, 3] The chapter draws its findings from forty-four qualitative individual interviews and seven focus group discussions carried out among the Baganda who were predominantly urban slum-dwellers across ten zones near the Kasubi market in Rubaga-North Division of Kampala.[4]

Unpacking the stigma of widowhood

According to the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (UNDAW/DESA, 2001, p. 2), 'in many developing countries the exact numbers of widows, their ages and other social and economic aspects of their lives are unknown.' There were no pre-existing records for death in the study area, unlike in developed countries where there are systematic official records of deaths, or general practice lists of deaths, that provide sampling frames for identifying and selecting widowed individuals.

The study found that residents in the study area sought health care for terminal illnesses from a range of sources, including public and private hospitals, clinics, pharmacies, traditional healers, churches, medical research centres and lay health workers. As they approached death, many patients had emigrated out of the city to their rural homes of origin to prepare for death because they believed they could take advantage of stronger networks of support and care within their family or clan or because the costs (financial, material and in terms of time) of care are reportedly lower in the villages than in the city.[5] Deaths were therefore more often reported and recorded in the village of origin rather than in the urban areas from which people returned.[6] Most of those who died in the city were transported back to their place of origin for burial, largely because of both severe restrictions on land ownership and land-use in the city and conformity with traditional cultural practices. Customary observances for the dead require that the deceased's kin – his or her lineage and clan – fulfil the funeral rites of burial and disposal, thereby obliging them to mobilize resources to transport the corpse. The notion of an abandoned corpse is decried as a-cultural: 'as though one lacks a clan'.

With the increasing number of AIDS-related deaths in Uganda, particularly prior to the public roll-out of antiretroviral therapy provision in 2004,

the label of 'widowhood' became heavily imbued with stigma.[7] Widows and widowers are locally referred to as *Namwandu* and *Semwandu* respectively. Until recently, the use of these Luganda terms for individuals entitled them to receive sympathy, assistance and appropriate support. However, many widows interviewed for this research stated their aversion to being addressed by the title *Namwandu* because of the connotations more recently associated with the term:

> Fiina: For me, I do not want to be called *Namwandu* at all. If you use that label I feel a chill in my body. It takes me back to that place where my husband was just lying still before me. I do not want it at all. (23-year-old widow)

> Viola: People here do not know that I am a widow, even though my husband died of AIDS. Everybody calls me by my first name. In fact even the man I am now with does not believe I am a widow because he says that nobody calls me *Namwandu*. Maybe it is better that way. (32-year-old widow)

> Naluswa: If you call these younger girls *Namwandu*, you will make enemies because they do not want people to know.
> Phoebe: That is true. They fear because most people die today because of AIDS. They fear to be known.
>
> Interviewer: But what is the problem of knowing?
> [Many participants talk at once.]
> Nabankema: Heh. They say that it will kill their deal of getting another man to marry them.
> Nabbona: That you are spoiling for them their market.
> Nabosa: Eh eh, who will go to her when they know that she may have the virus?
> Naluswa: Leave it, leave it. If you want peace, you pretend not to know anything about it because it can become a serious problem for you. (Widows' group – mean age 38 years)

> Flavia: When I was first addressed as *Namwandu*, I cried a lot.
> Interviewer: Where was this?
> Flavia: It was during the last funeral rites ceremony for my husband.

> The clan leader said, 'Let *Namwandu* come and sit here in the middle.' I stayed in my place on the mat where I was sitting because it had not yet sunk in my head that I was actually the one he was referring to. Then my mother-in-law patted my shoulder, saying, *'Namwandu, Namwandu*, he is telling you.' My friend, I cried a lot. I was pained. I kept thinking, 'Now I am called *Namwandu.*' But later when I joined the Mothers' Union,[8] they comforted me and said it is okay to be called that way.
>
> Interviewer: Does it still affect you?
>
> Flavia: No, not really. But I prefer to be called Mrs Mutebi, which is my marital name. (52-year-old widow)

Generational differences in perceptions and attitudes towards the use of this label were evident. While most younger widows did not appreciate being given the title *Namwandu,* many older widows emphasized its historical merit, notably its use in justifying requests for financial help or understanding when bills, rent or school fees for orphans[9] were either late or not forthcoming.

There was general agreement among both the men and the women interviewed that being a widow or widower in contemporary Uganda tends to raise suspicions that widowed individuals might be infected with HIV, which is assumed to have caused the death of the deceased spouse. Three participants whose husbands died of causes other than AIDS reported incidents during which they were mistakenly assumed to belong to associations of people living with HIV (PLHIV) simply because they were widowed. One of them, aged 32 years, reported that she continually felt compelled to correct this impression by explaining that her husband was murdered and to the best of her knowledge he was not HIV-positive at the time of his death.

The study revealed a dramatic transformation in the interpretation of widowhood among the Baganda. Twenty years ago, Obbo (1986, p. 105) wrote that

> widowhood (*obwanamwandu*) is prestigious for women who have land in their own right or who wish to emphasize their Christian leanings. The title *Namwandu* (widow) so-and-so is rivalled only by *Mukyala* (Mrs.) so-and-so. It seems to emphasize, 'I was once a respected married woman and although my husband is no longer alive, I wish to remain so.'

With the spread of the HIV and AIDS epidemic, the stigma associated with any AIDS-related person began to affect widows and widowers, leaving surviving

spouses open to suspicions of HIV infection. This often serves as justification for both men and women to distance themselves from being identified as widowed. Contrary to Obbo's observations mentioned above, in our research, there was no prestige associated with widowhood, irrespective of property ownership and across religious affiliations.

Our research findings highlighted differences between AIDS- and non-AIDS-associated widowhood. The former connoted pollution, danger and 'bad sex' (that is, sex leading to infection and eventual death). By contrast, widowhood not associated with AIDS invoked sympathy and notions of loss and 'no sex' (an unspecified period of mourning for the dead spouse during which sex is abstained from). It was evident that many widows and widowers made efforts to be placed into the latter category. In the study, only three out of forty-four people talked openly about their HIV-positive status; this is probably because they were well known to the research team and were receiving HIV treatment. Others refused to participate in the study because they did not want to be identified as widowed or even denied a previous marriage or having lost a spouse (despite local gossip to the contrary).

Interpretations of widowhood were further complicated among individuals who had lost a marital partner but were remarried at the time of the study: 'I am remarried. I am no longer a widower. Do I still qualify for your study?' Younger widows in particular expressed multiple and conflicting perceptions about widowhood as a transitional phase that could culminate in the 'achievement' of remarriage and the subsequent loss of the label 'widow'. While some HIV-infected widows were quick to remarry in order to avoid the suspicion of infection, others used their status to discourage new sexual advances. Among older participants, a widow was understood to be anyone who experienced the death of a spouse, regardless of any subsequent change in marital status.[10] Where women had limited resources, remarriage was considered a practical strategy for supporting oneself and one's dependants. The local language developed new terms to reflect the growing incidence of remarriage following widowhood, such as *Naakafiisa ba biri* – twice widowed, *Naakafiisa basattu* – three-times widowed, and so on.[11] Indeed, men in polygynous unions pointed to the limitations of the English language to characterize their experience and marital status:

> Swaibu: I have got three wives now. But then my first wife died. In Luganda you could call me *kafiisa,* which means he who has lost someone to death. But it is a great insult to my other wives to call me

widower in their hearing because they are still alive. They are still here with me. So how do you call me? Me, I am not a widower. (62-year-old widower)

The gendered dimensions of widowhood[12]

Men and women experience widowhood differently (Kalmijn, 2007; Lubben, 1989; Umberson et al., 1992). This is largely due to the politics of gender identity. African women are identified as wards of their male kin throughout their lives – first as the daughter of a father, then as the wife of a husband, the mother of a son, the widow of a deceased man – rather than being identified as women in their own right (Zulu, 1996). Our research confirmed the findings of early ethnographers (Kaggwa, 1905; Roscoe, 1911), which showed that women's status in Buganda (a patriarchal monarchical hierarchy) is derived from the significant male in their life, so that they are defined as the 'wife of a chief' or the 'daughter of a landowner'.[13] Landownership in Buganda has typically been a male domain, although more recent changes in the national constitution governing landownership have sought to redress violations of women's entitlement to land (Khadiagala, 2002). According to customary gender roles, men are considered to be providers, protectors and propagators of the lineage and clan and actors in the public domain. Women are seen as nurturers, homemakers, food preparers and (docile) actors in the private domain.

Customary approaches to marriage decree that men be proactive and women be passive recipients (Tamale, 2005) to the extent that men and/or their representatives (usually in the form of mediators, such as a paternal aunt, called *ssenga*) have the social authority to initiate sex education and awareness, propose a sexual relationship, determine whether or not marriages should proceed and establish the terms and format of the marriage ceremony (Nyanzi et al., 2001).[14]

In a customary marriage, the man, his kinsmen and his clan members pay a bride price to the woman's family. This typically takes the form of *omwenge omuganda* – local brew, clothes for the parents, food, money, animals, such as cattle or goats, and more recently, electrical goods, such as fridges, cookers and washing machines. In exchange, the woman moves from her parents' or her own home to her husband's household. She loses her name and adopts his. Decisions about child-bearing, sexual exchanges and child-rearing are all made by the husband. The wife bears children for him and his clan.[15] Unless

the wife dies or is divorced, she is considered one of her husband's exclusive assets or possessions. The practice of polygyny allows men to marry additional wives[16] while restricting women to only one husband at a time (Musisi, 1991). Polyandry, the practice of women marrying several men, is taboo in Kiganda culture. However, having serial multiple marital partners is socially acceptable for women, especially after divorce or widowhood.

The implications of spousal death inevitably play out differently for widows and widowers. In this male-dominated society, whereas a widowed husband has the upper hand in determining the fate of his deceased wife's body, a widowed wife is almost always 'left' as one of the deceased man's many possessions in a list of commodities to be inherited by other members of his clan and lineage.[17] The widow cannot independently decide on the burial and funeral arrangements for her deceased husband. She submits to the choices and directives of his lineage and clan elders. She carries out his will, whether it was spoken or written. If the will was spoken, adults close to the deceased (but excluding his children and wives) confirm having witnessed him state his desires and articulate what these were.

Key informant interviews clarified that it is widely believed among the Baganda that a husband has the power to make decisions about his wife's fate after he dies, whereas the same authority does not extend to the wife. The influence of a husband over his wife or wives extends further than his lifetime because he is duty-bound to leave a will that specifies her future caretaker, residence, entitlements from his property and the possessions she must relinquish. All of the widows interviewed described the influence of their deceased husbands over the successive course of their lives, albeit to varying degrees (Nyanzi, 2004). None of the widowers interviewed attested to any such posthumous influence exerted by their wives.

As outlined above, patrilineal clan structures mean that women typically move from their own household to that of their husband on marriage. According to custom, a wife never gains membership in her husband's clan, although she can bear progeny who will be part of the clan. Marriage is potentially isolating and alienating for a bride; much depends on how her in-laws receive and respond to her. Her marital experience is shaped largely by the relationship(s) that she negotiates, cultivates and establishes with significant and influential members of her husband's family. While some widows spoke of cooperation, love, support and mutual respect from their in-laws, others reported varying levels of neutrality, indifference, neglect, rejection, hostility and enmity and even the need for legal recourse. For some, the relationship

mixed civility, support and hostility depending on the issue at hand or the individuals involved. For others, the tone of relationships changed with time. Even where relationships had been characterized by mutual trust and respect, many reported that the death of their spouse had uncovered the malicious side of their in-laws.

Although no widowers in the study recounted experiences of suffering at the hands of their in-laws, many widows recalled name-calling and insults, as well as blame for causing their husband's death through witchcraft[18] or neglect or by infecting him with HIV. Some widows reported that their in-laws repossessed their property – including land, assets, motor vehicles, business enterprises, domestic wares and so on – through treachery, tricks and theft. Other widows were threatened with the loss of their children, a few actually forfeiting them either temporally or permanently to their in-laws.

> Nabachwa: It is when he died that I realized how greedy my in-laws were for his property. I was crying from the pain of losing him, and his older brother was busy organizing people to come see the land in case they wanted to buy it. He did not even ask me if that is what I was planning to do. I only got to know when the bank asked me for my signature just after the burial. (40-year-old widow)

> Sylvia: I have heard stories of people whose in-laws are good to them when they become widows. For me, it was very difficult because my husband's family members are shameless. Imagine, his body was still lying in the coffin in the small house we were renting, and they were busy quarrelling about his shirts and shoes as they tried them on. They took the keys of the bedroom from me, went into his suitcase and bags and audibly distributed his few possessions – clothing, bed linen, the wall clock, his Sanyo FM radio, the paraffin lantern that was a wedding gift, our mattresses. They even shared the old crockery, wooden stools and charcoal stove that I had brought when I came into his house. Imagine, they never waited for the burial or the last funeral rites. They did not even think of our two little children.[19] They are shameless. After the burial, it was too much for me because my sister-in-law returned with a pickup truck and even took the *etogero* – the big clay pot outside on the veranda, in which we stored water. Since it was a rented house, I left and went back to my father. (37-year-old widow)

Nagawa: You see, he was sick for a long time, and I was treating him. At first his family used to come visiting when we were in hospital. They would bring some money or things to help us. Sometimes his mother would even ask me to take a break and go home while she stayed over and took my place by his side. But then as time passed and he got so sick and thin, always in and out of hospital, they frankly told me that they were tired of me and my witchcraft. My mother-in-law and her daughter said I was bewitching him so that I could take off with his wealth. Another time I overheard my mother-in-law telling the nurses that they were wasting time treating him with *edaggala ezungu* (European medicine) because she knew that I had bewitched him and only *edagala eganda* (traditional Kiganda medicine) would work. Imagine your in-laws saying such things about you. (42-year-old widow)

Eseza: They were belittling me and wanted to take my children away from me. So I took them to the attorney general. It was there that my brother-in-law said, 'That woman is sick. She has HIV because she gave it to my brother. We saw his medical notes. Now she wants to take our children. How does she think she will look after them when she is sick or when she dies? Unless of course she knows that she also infected them. Ah ah, if our children are fine, she must hand them over to us now, otherwise she must know that if she ever gets stuck, she cannot turn back to us for support. This thing ends here today.' He shamed me. (43-year-old widow)

One of the biggest challenges facing widows is the loss of their husband's wages and non-wage household contributions. All of the participants in the study articulated concerns about the increased financial and caregiving responsibilities relating to their children[20] after the death of their spouse. For widowers, the main challenge lies in meeting childcare needs; for widows, the principal concerns are financial: paying school fees and hospital bills and for food, clothing and shelter. It is therefore not surprising that a primary motivation for seeking a new partner and/or remarriage is to help to meet the demands of parenthood.

Henry: When she died the children were still too young to be left without the care and guidance of a mother.
Interviewer: How old were they?
Henry: Kigongo was 7, the twins were 6, and Kizza was 4. I could not

look after them well. Cooking food was very difficult. But also washing clothes, bathing them, making beds, eh-eh it was difficult for me to manage alone, even though I later got a housemaid. Afterwards my sisters and aunt introduced me to some women. I chose one of them. We are together. (39-year-old widower)

Nalugwa: Many women remarry out of concern for their orphaned children.
Viola: She looks at the unpaid school fees, their torn clothes and bare feet without fitting shoes, house rent … yet a man can help her.
Bukirwa: Sometimes she may even lack basics like salt, cooking oil, soap, charcoal or fuel for the lamp. Electricity is cut off. And yet there is a man who is interested in her who will provide for the children as well.
Nalumansi: It is especially difficult if you are jobless yet there are many children depending on you. Either you accept marriage, otherwise some women sell themselves.
[Laughter from other participants.] (Widows' group – mean age 54 years)

Two of the widowers, aged 56 and 57, reported that they had chosen not to remarry even though they had both completed the socially accepted period of mourning and had carried out all of the last funeral rites for their dead wives.

Jjuuko: Can I remarry at this age with my grey hairs and return to buying nappies or baby bottles? My sons are of marriageable age. Shall we both be chasing after girls – father and sons? I prefer to remain single. (57-year-old widower)

Sejjabbi: For me, I abstain completely. Since my wife died, I stopped those things of women. I am focusing on getting my children through school. During the holidays I take them to their grandparents in our village home, where they help with the farm work. (56-year-old widower)

Other arrangements among widowers ranged from having 'informal' sexual partners who were kept secret from their children to cohabitation with partners or remarriage.

> Seezi: For me, I do not believe in bringing the new woman I am seeing into the home I made and shared with my late wife. I got a maid for the children. And I rented a two-room house for my woman, way from here. I go to her for I have needs as a man. It is better to have one person who helps me with my manly needs than to go here and there because I might catch some terrible illness there. My children do not know about her. It is not their business. (40-year-old widower)

Widowers' subsequent marital relationships follow customary traditions that involve the widower meeting the woman's family, expressing the intention of settling down with her, agreeing on and paying the bride price and arranging the public festivities that seal her position in his household as new wife and stepmother.

A central difference in the experiences of widows and widowers pertains to sexuality: their individual sexual autonomy, their right to choose sexual partner(s) or to be sexually active and their access to sexual and reproductive health services and care. Men have the autonomy to decide and act in the sexual realm as they choose. Even in the face of pressure from relatives – hinting, scheming or matchmaking – they are ultimately able to maintain decision-making control. Furthermore, as revealed by the two examples above, it is possible for individual men to go against the trend and choose to remain abstinent, unmarried or single. Paying sex workers is another alternative open to men, although none of our male interviewees admitted doing so. This autonomy, however, was not available to the widows in the study, particularly in the context of the sociocultural institution of widow inheritance, an integral component of customary Buganda society.

The customary 'script' of widow inheritance in Buganda

As highlighted in Nyanzi (2004), widow inheritance is a context-specific practice that is enacted differently depending on the historical moment, location, social strata, ethnicity, religion, age, class, country and so on. Here, the focus is on the social script of widow inheritance as narrated by the Baganda[21] study participants. Widow inheritance is founded upon the principle of levirate marriage and is a practice whereby the brothers of a deceased man are required to choose one from among themselves to marry the grieving widow in order to ensure further propagation of the clan. In Buganda, this practice extends beyond the natural biological brothers of the deceased to include all

of his male relatives and descendants within his clan.[22] Because clan members are assumed to have contributed either in cash, kind or services towards the marriage ceremony of their kin, each is entitled to lay claim to the widow. In Luganda, the wife of a fellow clan member is referred to as *mukyala wange* (my wife) or *mukyala waffe* (our wife) by all clan members, male or female, elderly or young. Widow inheritance takes place after the husband's burial, when the widow undergoes a number of rites. According to custom, the new levirate guardian – locally known as the *mukuza* (levir) – is required to take on responsibility for the widow, her dependants and the deceased's business(es) or property if any exist.

> Interviewer: When you say he takes over the widow, what do you actually mean? What responsibilities or activities does this involve? [Giggles.]
> Nakandi: To take care of her like her husband was doing.
> Nabiteeko: To help her with any problem she may have. Also to counsel her about what to do with the orphans or how to support them.
> Interviewer: Does it involve sex?
> Babirye: Hmm, it is difficult because different people do it differently. How can a man do for you so much, bringing food, money for electricity and water bills, paying school fees for the children, and you refuse him sex when he asks?
> Roza: But that is weakness of character. If we all slept with everyone who does some kindness to us, where would the world be today?
> Babirye: But some people do it. They even have children with the *Bakuza*. Don't you see them, my friends?
> [Many voices in agreement.] Yes we hear about them.
> Nakandi: But me I think it depends on someone's heart. We all have different hearts. Some are easily tempted and others can withstand. (Widows' group – mean age 38 years)

Negotiating widow inheritance

For twenty-five of the thirty-five widows interviewed, levirate guardians (*mukuza*) had been appointed during the ceremony of last funeral rites for the deceased.[23] At the same time, the *omusika w'omusaayi* (the blood heir of the deceased) was instated, along with the *lubuga*[24] (the female caretaker of the

heir and other orphans). During the ceremony, the deceased's property was distributed among different relatives and friends, either in line with his written or spoken will or as the clan leaders deemed fit and fair. Where debts existed, plans for repayment – through liquidating assets, withdrawing monies from available bank balances or refinancing payments against future income from the deceased's financial assets, such as rental property or trade – were drawn up.[25]

None of the widows had any direct role in choosing their levirate guardian. In most cases, the decision is made in a meeting involving older clan members, lineage members and leaders of the deceased's clan. Widows are excluded from decision-making because they are outsiders to the clan. Potential candidates are nominated firstly by the deceased's immediate family and secondly by the wider kin-group at clan level. The levirate guardian is then selected through a system of self-elimination or by decree of the clan leaders. In rare cases, the levirate guardian is named in the deceased's will.

Many widows reported that they had accepted their *mukuza* but had not had any meaningful relationship with him subsequent to the last funeral rites ceremony. They reported highly infrequent encounters and little, if any, support. Some widows experienced verbal, physical or other abuse, sexual violence, loss of property, threats of dispossession, actual eviction from land or houses and being forced to give up their children.

Different explanations were given for power and authority exerted by the *mukuza* and their violation of the personhood, property, progeny and position of the widows. Some believed that these spring from cultural mandates, whereas others rejected this logic as a-cultural to the Baganda, or otherwise by appropriating human rights discourses. Many suggested that the levirs' personal greed, society's poverty, male privilege and the weakness that shook a widow's resolve to refuse sexual advances, leading to some widows themselves giving in to the abuse perpetrated by some in-laws, create the context for the power of the levirs. Some differences in explanation can be attributed to linguistic ambiguities.[26]

The experience of widowers

Those widowers interviewed who had completed their deceased wife's last funeral rites ceremonies revealed that their in-laws had selected an 'heiress' charged with the responsibility of looking after the children from among the

dead woman's sisters or other female paternal relatives (usually a niece – a daughter of her brother, in keeping with clan membership). Because a mother's heir must be from her clan, it is not possible according to Kiganda custom for her children to be her heirs – they belong to their paternal clan only. All the widowers clarified that their relationships with the 'heiresses' were platonic and that they hardly ever saw them after the last funeral rites ceremony. According to the widowers, none of them had pursued the female heiresses for sex, and they considered the idea to be obscene and impossible. The reasons given for not becoming sexually involved with these women included: 'the girl was too young for me'; 'she was already married and was happy in her home with her husband and children'; 'I am HIV-positive and abstaining from sex to protect myself and other women'; 'there was no sexual attraction'; 'I didn't interpret the relationship that way'; and 'how could I possibly think about her like that when she grew up in my home, under the care of her big sister?' For these men, the act of installing an heiress in the place of their late wife is part of the ritual preservation of custom and purely symbolic, undertaken because 'the children need someone to step into the shoes of their mother'. None of the widowers felt pressured by culture, clan elders or other influential media to engage in any sexual activity with the heiresses. In most cases, the heiresses did not move into the home.

> Jjuuko: I do not know that the heiress to my wife was installed to do anything with me. If so, then she is not getting it from me because as far as I am concerned she is there for the sake of the children. In death, any parent must get an heir, otherwise she cannot rest in peace when there is no one to fulfil her responsibilities for her charges. If you do not give her an heiress, she will persistently haunt the family and even other members of the clan until you settle the issue. People will fall mad, heh! (57-year-old widower)

> Sekamaanya: The children were shown the heiress to their mother. I gave her my wife's clothes because the children were too young to wear them. But then I have never seen her again. She has never come to visit the children or even done anything for them. It is *akalombolombo k'ebyobuwangwa* (a cultural custom that doesn't mean much). (39-year-old widower)

In effect, the 'heiresses' do not impose any sexual relationship on the widowers in the name of customary practice, unlike claims about levirs and widows.

Available public provisions and social support

In Uganda, there is no social policy dealing specifically with widowed people. When asked about government policies or programmes that attempt to redress some aspects of the multiple layers of marginalization, abuse and violation faced by the widowed, study participants reported that they were not aware of any within the physical, social or political spaces they had access to. Widows in Masaka District agreed (Nyanzi, 2004). A common response across all of the interviews was that 'there are many projects targeting orphans left by the deceased but none for the spouse left behind'. This echoes a UN Division for the Advancement of Women report (UNDAW/DESA, 2001, p. 3), which concludes that:

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

We probed further, asking what the plethora of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were doing for widows and widowers. Study participants stated that these institutions targeted groups of defined beneficiaries, such as PLHIV or war-affected and displaced people.

> Juliet: The biggest problem is that the one [NGO] that I know is TASO, which aims at people with AIDS. Me here, I am a widow with very similar problems to the ones faced by those other people who go to TASO. But then I cannot qualify to go for TASO because I am not infected with HIV. My husband died in a car accident. So the organization is not for all of us widows. They must test your blood for you to qualify. Otherwise you bring proof from your doctor that shows that you have it before you can become a benefiting member of the support they give. (36-year-old widow)

At the same time, however, participants whose deceased spouse was buried in one of the *ekiggya* (lineage graveyards) in the rural compounds often mentioned that they received social, emotional, financial and material support called *amataaba* from burial society members during the period immediately after the death. Known locally as *Munno Mukabi* (literally translated as 'your

friend in times of trouble'), these burial societies are an integral part of village life in Buganda. They consist of a group of men and women from the village who come together to provide labour for tasks related to the processes leading up to the burial ceremony. These include cooking, cleaning, fetching water and fuelwood, constructing temporary shelters, such as tarpaulin tents or makeshift huts made from tree branches, twigs, hay or other fodder grasses and banana leaves, and so on, to cater for the relatives and friends who travel to attend the burial rituals in their neighbourhood. Operated on the principles of goodwill and reciprocity, *Munno Mukabi* burial societies suffered major setbacks in the crisis periods when AIDS deaths increased dramatically, draining their resources and depriving beneficiaries of their support and assistance. However, some participants reported that the *Munno Mukabi* members in their village did provide assistance and coordinated the immediate response to the obituary and that they participated in relaying the public announcement of the spouse's death either by word of mouth or via public media, including radio, newspapers or television.

> Nakuya: The people of *Munno Mukabi* came in big numbers. They brought knives for peeling, brooms, large saucepans and even jerry cans to help with fetching water. They asked me what the plans were. I did not have a plan because I had never gone through this. I did not know what to do. I was waiting for my father-in-law to come and make the arrangements. But then the people of *Munno Mukabi* helped me to prepare things, like passing the word round the village, composing the death announcement to send to the radio station, writing a list of jobs to do. The elderly women told me to be brave because the death was just the beginning of a big test. 'How will you look after the children you have, if you do not strengthen yourself now? Be brave, be brave!' they said to me. (36-year-old widow)

> Sikola: It was good that we had *Munno Mukabi* because they knew where I could get bark cloth to wrap his body in. They knew who could dig the grave quickly and cheaply. They even chose the priest who led the mass. You see I had not been living in the village. We only went there for Christmas holidays. So I did not know the system well when we took him back for burial. (25-year-old widow)

> Nakku: I feared the nights mostly. We spent two days with his body in the house because we were waiting for his oldest daughter who lives

abroad. But at night, the members of *Munno Mukabi* came and slept in our compound, even before the relatives from far arrived. They were singing hymns throughout the night, around the big fire. They helped me go through those nights. (42-year-old widow)

All of the participants who held the burial in the city reported that they did not receive any assistance from a *Munno Mukabi* but instead mobilized the support of close family members, friends and colleagues and members of the associations to which they belonged.

Nalongo: During the death of your family members is when you see who your friends are. That is when you know who your people are: those who care about you and what you are going through. They will come and be by your side. They will comfort you and spend some time with you. (43-year-old widow)

Namuli: People come to the burial. Your relatives. His relatives. The neighbours from the village … yes. But after the burial everybody departs, and you are left all alone looking at the house and the orphans. (45-year-old widow)

Most widowed people participating in the study had received some level of support from kin, society, churches, clubs or employers immediately after their spouse died. After the burial, however, they were often plunged into loneliness, isolation and seclusion. Many claimed to have suffered from neglect by family, society and the government, especially in cases where the last funeral rites were conducted at the same time as the burial ceremony.

Possible interventions

In the absence of public provisioning for the widowed, the cultural institution of widow inheritance – which has traditionally served to provide support to widows – could be a viable resource for adapting interventions. For instance clan elders, male kin, heirs and levirs are educated through community awareness programmes about alternative modes of caring for widows (and orphans) in ways that enhance their well-being and protect their multiple rights. However, this would require that the traditional Buganda leadership – including the Kabaka (King) and his cabinet, as well as clan leaders and elders – address the

inherent patriarchal structures and mechanisms that perpetrate the multiple violations enacted through this institution. They could, for example, establish an educational programme to explicitly reject any such abuses carried out in the name of Kiganda culture.

As the Ugandan economy grows, the state could also increase its provision of public goods in the form of social protection for marginalized social groups, including poor widows and widowers. Potential interventions could include: the provision of low-cost housing, pensions and food grants; income-generation schemes; and the abolition of school fees for children with at least one dead parent. Subsidies could be provided to increase access to these services for poorer individuals. Harnessing community-based programmes, such as widow/widower support groups, and formally recognizing burial societies could also mobilize resources for widow empowerment.

Existing interventions that harness networks of grassroots human rights and legal advocacy organizations to focus attention on the plight of widows and widowers need to be strengthened. Community education about property rights, inheritance laws, will-making, marital rights in the event of spousal death and so on must be channelled through media outlets that reach marginalized social groups. Widows could also benefit from self-help associations and from sharing success stories and strategies for contesting abuse and subjugation through recourse to the law or personal resource mobilization. These associations would also make the widowed more visible as a disadvantaged and growing – though heterogeneous – group affected by HIV and AIDS.

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Notes

1. Activism carried out by non-governmental organizations on behalf of widows in conflict situations has positioned war widows as a target group with respect to humanitarian aid, programmes and policies. This approach has been criticized by feminists, who argue that women's relationship status – that is, their status in relation to men – has become the main criteria for beneficiaries, to the exclusion of those widowed for other reasons or divorced, or single women. Thus there are classes of widows; some have interventions because they were for example married to army officials, and others lack specific targeting.
2. We have discussed elsewhere the contestation of sexual stereotypes associated with widowhood, lay-meaning-making systems of wills, survival strategies and how generational differentiation impacts on the everyday performances and processes of widowhood in urban Uganda (Nyanzi, 2004).
3. Luganda is the language, Buganda is the kingdom, the people are Baganda (singular Muganda), and the derivative adjective is Kiganda.
4. Fieldwork was conducted in 2006 and 2007 by the Community-Based Healthcare Programme of Mengo Hospital, Kampala. In the data collection, we triangulated ethnographic participant observation, qualitative individual interviews, focus group discussions and a policy review. Purposive, snowball and theoretical sampling techniques were combined. Informed consent was both verbal and written. Participation was voluntary. Transport fees and refreshments were provided for group sessions. Pseudonyms have been used in this chapter to ensure respondent anonymity.
5. Mukiza-Gapere and Ntozi (1995) and Ntozi (1997) discuss migration patterns during widowhood in Uganda.
6. Since Kasubi-Kawaala offers relatively cheap residence in the fringes of Kampala, the majority of its residents are migrant city workers who originate from various rural districts inside and outside Uganda. During key informant interviews, councillors from LCI and LCII levels confirmed that most residents in their jurisdiction died and were buried outside Kasubi-Kawaala.
7. See the section entitled 'The gender dimensions of widowhood' for a description and discussion of the contested usage of this label for men as being a-cultural (defined as not belonging to local claims of culture) and foreign to everyday language, perhaps introduced by those unaware of proper Kiganda custom.
8. Based within the Anglican church, the Mothers' Union is a fellowship of all women who have been married by a minister, with international, regional, national and local chapters right down to the smallest parish. In the country, it is exclusive to Church of Uganda members.

9. See later in this chapter for an explanation of the use of the word 'orphan' in this context.
10. Potash (1986, p. 15) distinguishes between conceptualizations of widowhood as a phase between marriages or as an ongoing status.
11. These phrases are common in 'positive-living testimonies', where PLHIV publicly disclose and discuss the meaning of living with HIV. However, in other contexts, the experience of multiple spousal losses is culturally suspicious, with individuals shunned as potential marital partners lest they also 'kill' the new spouse. Rituals of cleansing are sometimes carried out in order to restore balance.
12. Given the accessibility and public visibility of widows compared to widowers, the final study sample comprised a ratio of 35 widows to 9 widowers.
13. Only men become chiefs. The only exceptions are women belonging to the royal class – princesses, queens and wives of royalty. Princesses are addressed as *Ssebo* (Sir). Despite an abundance of princesses, only princes ever ascend to the throne as kings.
14. These gender roles are reflected in Luganda language. The man is the active 'doer' of marriage: *awasa* – he marries. The woman is the passive party to whom marriage is 'done': *afumbirwa* – she gets married, *awasibwa* – she gets married.
15. Because Buganda is patrilineal, all children are born into their father's clan. Their identity, name, totem, kin, role and social position in the kingdom's hierarchy and inter-clan functions are predetermined by their father's clan. With the exception of royal wives, women can never 'own' their children within this system.
16. As long as the man can afford the bride price and performs the customary marriage ceremony, no other criteria – economic status, age, access to land, space, and so forth – can prevent him from marrying more wives.
17. Residence in customary social organization among the Baganda is both patrilocal and virilocal; thus children live in the father's household, and wives shift into their husband's household. Thus at the death of a husband, a widow has to justify why she should remain in the deceased's shelter, otherwise she risks dispossession or repossession by her in-laws.
18. Witchcraft is an ambivalent label in this context. Here it refers to appeals to spiritual evil forces to produce negative impacts on another person's life, business, well-being, health, and so forth.
19. Sylvia retained guardianship of all her children, although her in-laws took the property.
20. Local conceptualizations of orphanhood are highly ambivalent. According to custom, there are no orphans in Buganda because children belong to their patrilineal extended family and their father's clan. All paternal uncles are called *Taata*

omutto, meaning 'young father'. Paternal aunts are called *Ssenga,* alluding to the expression 'if you were a man you would be my father'. The term *abaana enfuuzi,* meaning 'children who have experienced parental death', is commonly applied to those who have lost either one or both biological parents. *Mulekwa,* meaning 'a child left behind by a deceased', is widely used by organizations. However, many Baganda elders reject this use of the term as a westernization, explaining that even when both parents die, children are left in the care of their extended family network and are thus not really '*bamulekwa*'.

21. Because ethnicity is one of the main frames through which the social construction and scripting of widow inheritance is mediated, our research was designed to include exclusively Baganda individuals. Indeed, there are many examples of study participants highlighting that 'that is what the Basoga, Banyankole or [some other ethnicity] do. It is not for us Baganda.'
22. Since clan members all claim descent from the same forefather, the clan is in effect a large extended family, with these kin ties valued and thereby respected through, for example, incest taboos. Therefore individuals of the same clan but from separate biological lineages cannot marry; although there is no bloodline connecting them, incest taboo observances apply to them because they are of the same clan. In Luganda, the nouns used for male members of one's clan are the same as for biological brothers – namely, *mwanyinaze* and *muganda wange,* as used by a sister and brother respectively.
23. Of the ten widows without a *mukuza,* nine had either not yet conducted the last funeral rites for their deceased husband – for reasons including lack of finances, failure of the in-laws to organize the rites, a falling out with the in-laws, the loss of the will, the deceased's debts, difficulties in scheduling or conflicting scheduling by the clan leaders – or the burial had only taken place recently.
24. Based on patrilineality, only members of the deceased man's clan are appointed as *lubuga*. She is therefore always one of the widow's in-laws.
25. See Nyanzi (2004) for a discussion of the multidimensional consequences of will-making in contemporary Uganda.
26. See Potash (1986) for an examination of the contradictions, overlaps and confusion surrounding the definition of the actual roles and responsibilities of the levir.

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