THE EFFICACY OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT INITIATIVES IN ZIMBABWE: THE CASE OF THE PROPERTY RIGHTS OF WIDOWS IN SIKALENGE WARD OF BINGA DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT

Widows who have experienced property grabbing suffer untold socio-economic and psychological consequences. This is common in Zimbabwe and many other African societies where their husbands die intestate. Empowerment for the widows who become victims is very crucial for social work intervention. The study discusses empowerment for widows who experience property stripping. It further discusses social work intervention strategies. The study was qualitative in nature. Employing a non-probability purposive sampling technique, the study used semi-structured interviews to collect data from ten widows. The data collected from the widows were analysed thematically to enable textual presentation of the findings from the empowerment needs of the widows. The finding indicated the need for empowerment as a social work intervention as the usual legal intervention proved to be inaccessible and incomprehensible enough to meet the needs of the widows after the property has been stripped from them.

Keywords: Widows, Empowerment, Property Stripping, Social Work, Zimbabwe.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the property inheritance experiences of widows in Zimbabwe and the empowerment strategies, social workers can use for intervention. Stripping widows of property, is a huge social problem in Zimbabwe especially with the escalating death toll due to Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS). Property stripping refers to depriving someone of acquired or inherited movable or immovable possessions that rightfully and legally belong to that person (The South African Concise Oxford Dictionary; Kuenyehia 2003). Widows who experience property stripping needs to be empowered. The term empowerment has different meanings in different socio-cultural and political contexts. Due to the fact that empowerment has definitional impression, Lymbery & Buttler (2004) warn that the term empowerment is likely to be a debased term or to have its value lowered yet empowerment is very important in the context of social work practice. However, United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) (2001:9) maintains that empowerment has features such as ‘self-strength, control, self-power, self-reliance, own choice, the life of dignity in accordance with one's values, capable of fighting for one’s own rights, independence, own decision making, being free, awakening and capacity.’

Zastrow (2004:431) defines empowerment as ‘the process of helping individuals, families, groups and communities increase their personal, interpersonal, socioeconomic, and political strength and influence toward improving their circumstances’. Griffen (2005:118) argues that a proper understanding of empowerment requires a sense of what ‘power’ means because the word means ‘adding to women’s power’. Griffen (2005:2) defines power as:
having control, having a say and being listened to, being able to define and create from a woman’s perspective, being able to influence social choices and decisions affecting the whole society and being recognised and respected as equal citizens and human beings with a contribution to make.

Griffen (2005) is of the opinion that the ability to choose is also central to the concept of power. However, the choice has been qualified in a number of ways to make it relevant to the concept of power. In many instances widows are not allowed to have choices that do not deprive them of their rights as human beings. This highlights the need for empowerment.

Our contention is that empowerment is fully achieved when the cognitions of the widows concerning themselves are changed such that they accept the conditions they are in and work toward removing internalised oppression (Trevithick 2005). Further, empowerment should start within the individual widows before it can be felt by people and structures around them. This will enable them to have confidence in exercising their rights to inherit property which makes Trevithick assert that they will ‘gain greater control over their lives and their circumstances’ (p 219). In this article, it is argued that any form of empowerment approach that can work properly for the widows, has to start with changing their world view and the view of themselves for the positive. This will enable them to use to advantage any empowerment activity or programme that is directed towards them.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

People with less power, such as widows whose property has been stripped have been helped through the empowerment approach to social work practice. The empowerment approach is a dramatic departure from traditional social work practice and concentrates on the strength of the victim towards liberation from his or her social problems (Saleeby 2002).

The approach was useful for this study as it helped to explore ways in which the widows may utilize their own strength to move from their current position towards adjustment. Empowerment in itself has a liberating function which ‘unleashes human energy and spirit, critical thinking, the questioning of authority, challenges to the conventional wisdom, and adds new ways of being and doing’ (Saleeby 2002:7). The study utilized the empowerment approach for formulating intervention strategies as it is in line with the radical feminist theoretical framework which informs the study.

2.1 Empowerment Strategies And Needs Of Widows Stripped Of Property

Consistent with the model of empowerment, it is important to determine the empowerment needs of the widows so that appropriate empowerment strategies can be determined. Widowhood is associated with various deficiencies and needs that cause life to be difficult for widowed women. From the research conducted by Safieddin (1999), in North Cairo Zone of Egypt and Rao Gupter (2000), widows’ needs have been found to be economic, social, health, educational, and psychological in nature. Rao Gupter (2000) argues that these are the sources or components of power that are amenable to policy intervention and therefore form the basic empowerment needs of widows.

2.2 Information and education as an empowerment need

Education and information has a liberating function in everyday life. Due to its liberation function, education is very important Rao Gupter (2000), not only to widows but
to women in general. In Zimbabwe the adult literacy rate is 86 percent, but women constitute 60 percent of the illiterate population (National Gender Policy of Zimbabwe article 6.2.1). Women need to be in the know about their inheritance rights. Information is power and women have the right to receive it (Rao Gupter 2000). Education has been described by Medel-Anonuevo (1999) as empowering and is needed to enable the widows to have more self-help skills, more information and more knowledge about how the society they live in works. Further, Safieddin (1999) is of the opinion that education raises widows’ awareness of government institutions and non-governmental organizations that can provide them with assistance when they face difficult circumstances, such as property grabbing.

Women can face extra difficulties as heads of households if they do not have an adequate educational background or are prevented from obtaining further education; this can, for example, restrict their capacity to find work. Women are also in need of skills necessary to use, and exercise their inheritance rights which could be achieved by making them rights literate. They need training on communication about legal rights to inheritance so they can foster interfamily communication (Rao Gupter 2000). Chinkin (2001:67) suggests ‘public education and advocacy’ as crucial for educating not only widows but the public about the rights of widows. Chinkin (2001)’s argument is that there is a need to use multiple and broad strategies in educating stakeholders, especially decision-makers and civil society at all levels. ‘Education and training should be extended to state officials in positions of power over women, for example, social workers’ (Chinkin 2001: 67).

2.3 Economic Resources As An Empowerment Need

Literature in the field of economics reveals the accepted wisdom that clearly indicates the importance of improvement of women’s access to economic resources which cannot be overemphasized. According to Safieddin (1999) in North Cairo, economic needs rate first among the needs of the widows according to their own experience. Widows need to enjoy property and inheritance rights because property is the source for a decent life for most African widows where they had relied on their husbands for family income. A further step can be to enable them to have access to micro credit (Rao Gupter 2000) which can help them meet immediate financial needs and start small businesses. This does not only help to provide regular sustenance but also gives widows esteem in the eyes of society. Rao Gupter’s view of micro-credit as economically empowering for widows is contrary to Kabeer’s view of micro-credit and empowerment of women. Kabeer [undated], as quoted by Sisask (2000), argues that separating out women’s economic contribution reduced the impact of women’s access to credit, but the independent impact of access to credit on the empowerment indicators remained significant. In other words, access to credit and the size of reported economic contributions were each sufficient but not necessary for the achievement of empowerment. The two contrasting ideas of the researchers are very important for a closer analysis of economic empowerment and micro credit facilities afforded to widows as economic empowerment. This is a gap that further study should attempt to close in order to explore whether giving widows access to micro-credit in African communities in fact empowers them economically.

Strickland (2004) argues that ownership of land, housing and other property provides a secure place to live, the means of livelihood, and a measure of wealth or capital by which additional economic resources can be leveraged. It is argued from this perspective that giving widows land and property ownership can liberate them from economic hardships. The majority of the widows are sent back to their family of origin after the death of their husbands leaving behind land and property they used to own with their late husbands to the immediate family members of the husbands. With due consideration that the majority of widows in Zimbabwe affected by property stripping reside in the rural areas, where the
pillar of the economy is agriculture (Gopal and Salim 1998), it follows that inability to access land leads to economic hardships (Strickland 2004).

In rural areas, for example, land ownership is regulated by customary laws or cultural barriers and women often do not have the right to own land and property (Gopal and Salim 1998). In situations where a conflict has led to the destruction of traditional coping mechanisms, it is argued that the implications are that widowed women may be unable to support themselves and their dependents.

Most widowhood situations in Africa are affected and caused by the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) pandemic. From the perspective of the HIV and AIDS pandemic, Strickland argues that where women’s property and inheritance rights are upheld, women acting as heads or primary care givers of HIV and AIDS – affected households are better able to mitigate the negative economic consequences of AIDS. Promoting women’s economic security also helps prevent the spread of HIV and AIDS through unsafe sex and domestic violence. It is further argued that deprivation of property inheritance ‘drastically reduces the capacity of households to mitigate the consequences should a member be infected with HIV’ (Strickland 2004:10). Strickland (2004:5) maintains that ‘AIDS related losses can reduce household incomes by up to 80% and food consumption by an estimate of 30%’. The situation is aggravated for widowhood as a result of HIV and AIDS coupled with property grabbing. The situation is described to be desperate for those who must assume responsibility for dependent family members (International Committee of the Red Cross 2006). Due to the fact that widows become prone to economic hardship because of property grabbing, widows must be empowered economically to cope with this vulnerable situation they suddenly face. Widows who have the necessary educational qualifications need to have access to formal sector employment and protection in the informal sector from exploitation and abuse (International Committee of the Red Cross 2006).

To give widows power requires gender policies and constitutions that are designed to empower women. Policies that aim to decrease the gender gap in education, improve women's access to economic resources, increase women’s political participation, and protect women from violence are key elements in meeting the empowerment needs of women.

2.4 Health Needs And Empowerment

The health aspects cannot be overlooked in a consideration of the empowerment needs of widows. Women provide the vast majority of unpaid and often unrecognized health care within the family, in the community and in health care institutions (Foster 1996). Women also form the majority of paid health care providers and the main consumers of health care services. This signifies how important good health is to women.

Within the sub-Saharan region, 60% of the women, widows included, live positively (Strickland 2004). Zimbabwe and South Africa, for example, are some of the countries where widowhood is mainly due to HIV and AIDS pandemic, meaning that they need protection from property grabbing because it reduces economic resources they need to fight the disease. The widows’ health usually deteriorates due to, inability to access medication because of economic hardships. In support of this notion, Rao Guptar (2000:4) emphasizes that there is a need to ‘ensure that women have access to health services and that they have HIV and Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) prevention technologies that they can control, such as the female condom and microbicides’. From the study conducted by Safieddin (1999) in North Cairo, health needs ranked high in the perspective of the widows.

Strickland (2004) draws a link between the HIV and AIDS pandemic and property ownership. The writer argues that the research questions and intervention strategies are only beginning to explore the relationship between property ownership and inheritance, and HIV
prevention and mitigation of the impact of AIDS. From that point of departure it is argued that the health of HIV positive women is compromised too when they are disempowered and unable to inherit property.

The epidemic places many more women and children in this position than ever before because AIDS leaves many relatively young widows with orphans to look after, an additional stressor. On another level, however, the specific manner in which HIV and AIDS impoverish households means that upon finding herself a widow, a woman has few resources left, after property stripping with which to resist outside pressures and health demands in fighting the epidemic (Rao Chapter 2000).

Levirate marriages and sexual cleansing are also dangerous practices in African cultures that expose women to HIV and AIDS and other related sexually transmitted diseases. Such practices are very common in the Binga District of Zimbabwe, where people believe that a wife can be inherited after the death of a relative. A study from South Africa shows that women who experience forced sex (such as in sexual cleansing) are nearly six times more likely to use condoms inconsistently as compared to those who are not coerced (Strickland 2004). Inconstant use of condoms is a possible mode of transmitting HIV and AIDS and a health risk for widows.

2.5 Social Empowerment

Social status is of paramount importance to the widows and needs to be enhanced. The International Committee of the Red Cross (2006) maintains that women can be left entirely without social status when they lose their husbands, especially in patriarchal societies. The death of the main breadwinner can cause a breakdown in the familiar socialization processes for women when they take on roles traditionally reserved only for men. Safieddin (1999) found social needs to rank third highest for widows in the North Cairo Zone.

Rao Gupter (2000) advocates for the importance of increasing social support for widows who struggle to change existing gender norms by giving them opportunities to meet in groups that are visible in communities. There is also a need to strengthen local women’s organizations by providing them with adequate resources that will enable them to promote specialized community members’ functional social and family interactions.

A different view is to give widows a voice by providing them with the opportunity to create a group identity separate from that of the family because for many women in the family is often the social institution that enforces strict adherence to traditional gender norms that hinder women’s rights, (Rao Chapter 2000). Further, it is important to promote women’s decision-making at the household, community, and national level by promoting women’s leadership and participation.

There is a need to move the topic of violence against women in the context of property stripping from the private sphere to the public sphere. This is not a personal issue. It is a gross violation of women’s rights and has significant negative implications for the social development and health of widows in the communities as well as for economic development.

Widows need social encouragement to get over traumas and pick up the threads of life again in terms of taking up careers. Of greatest immediate importance is that ‘widows require a time and space to meet, organize and unleash their own power for change’ (Rao Gupter 2000:7). It is also necessary to build social awareness and to change the mind of people towards widows. Furthermore, as Safieddin (1999) maintains, there is a need for social services that include solutions to family problems and programmes on how to raise children and deal with them.
2.6 Psychological Needs And Empowerment

Widows need to be helped to deal with the psychological effects and insecurity that stem from losing husbands. In addition, they need to be helped to deal with direct consequences such as not being able to inherit property and not being able to remarry. Furthermore, ‘they often feel unable to talk about their loss, as they fear ostracism and other punishments from the society’ (International Committee of the Red Cross 2006:2). Isolation, stigmatization, anxiety and fear are also prominent psychological problems that widows face time and again (Safieddin 1999:2).

As a result, widows grieve in silence often with the added burden of raising a family alone. Those with dependent children often see their main reason for going on with life as the responsibility of raising their children. These children, particularly girls, may themselves be subjected to discrimination and unfair treatment because of their mother’s status (International Committee of the Red Cross 2006). The recommended solutions include the need to provide specialists to help widows deal with the psychological problems. Safieddin (1999) suggests the need to activate family counselling to solve widows’ psychological problems.

2.7 Empowerment Strategies And Roles Of Social Workers

Widows whose property has been stripped by the relatives of the husband can be empowered using appropriate interventional strategies. A strategy is defined as ‘the broad course of action you will follow to achieve your goal’ (Weyers 1997:34; Barker 2004). Social workers when applying interventional strategies should realize that women whose property has been stripped feel trapped as if they are in a cage where they cannot get out; they can get out with appropriate help. Despite the feeling of entrapment, widows need to express themselves in a manner that will enable them to be heard. They need also to exercise their rights like any other citizen and member of the community.

Apart from widows taking action themselves, social workers can assist the widows in dealing with problems thereby making use of various strategies and playing different roles depending on the strategy adopted. It is important to note that whichever strategy the social worker employs in assisting widows stripped of property, the social worker should tap the strengths of the widows in dealing with the problem. Saleeby (2002) is of the opinion that strengths of the individuals and communities are renewable and expandable resources that can be used successfully in a process of empowering and assisting the people concerned. If the strengths perspective can be utilized in empowerment strategies for women, results can be meaningful and have lasting effects for them as they will be part of the solution finding process. The principles that guide practice in empowerment using the strengths of people are outlined by Saleeby (2002) as follows:

(a) Every individual, group, family and community has strengths: This should inform the social worker that the widow in need of help possesses assets, resources, wisdom, and knowledge that at the outset the social worker may not have (p 14). These resources at the outset need to be treated with respect because of their potential for easing pain and achieving goals. The task of the social work practitioner is to be interested in the stories and experiences of the widows so that they can have a guide for practice.

(b) Trauma and abuse, illness and struggle may be injurious but they may also be sources of challenge and opportunity: Even though widows have been stripped of property, there is dignity to be drawn from undergoing such life challenges to their
growth and maturing. It is important to note that such challenges can be an impetus for change. Widows only need capacities, knowledge and skills for them to develop.

(c) Assume that you do not know the upper limits of the capacity to grow and change and take individual, group and community aspirations seriously: Despite the fact that widows have suffered from violence and unjust treatment by the relatives of the husband, still social workers must hold high widows’ expectations and align themselves with their hopes, visions and values.

(d) We best serve our clients by collaborating with them: Consistent with the strengths perspective, social workers must be collaborators or consultants for the widows because of their specialized education and experience to be resourced in offering help. They need to work together and move with them through their problems to realize of their aspirations.

(e) Every environment is full of resources: In their surrounding whence the problems seem to emanate, there are useful elements that can be utilized for problem solving. Informal systems of individuals, families, groups, and social circuits of peers can be used for empowerment. ‘No matter how harsh an environment can be, how it may test the mettle of its inhabitants, it can be understood to be a potentially lush topography of resources and possibilities’ (Saleeby 2002:17).

(f) Caring, caretaking and context: Social work is about care and caretaking. Weick (2000) as cited by Saleeby (2002) maintains that ‘social caretaking is the profession’s hidden voice, hidden because it is also woman’s voice’. Social caretaking and social work in the strengths perspective denote the revolutionary possibility of hope which is strengthened through social relationships in the family, neighbourhood and community. This denotes that the social worker can utilize people from the family and neighbourhood to assist the widows.

Cooke & Ellis (2004: 148), wrote extensively on oppressed and disadvantaged people, advise the use of the exit, voice and rights strategies in empowering the oppressed and disadvantaged. These three strategies empower widows in different ways that can help them minimize the impact of property stripping.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 The Exit Strategy And Empowerment

Seeing themselves overcoming the problem of property grabbing has always been the wishes of many widows. However, when they experience this problem, the widows find themselves entangled with the problem and therefore the exit strategy may be seen useful in this regard.

The exit strategy is applied to make widows challenge their problems and turn them into new perspectives that help them see the problems or undeveloped opportunities in a different light. In other words, widows who experience property inheritance problems need to have their problems solved but they experience blockages in their endeavours to find the way out of the ‘maze of trouble’. At times they develop ‘blind spots’ and can only see problems and overlook opportunities which makes them fixated on the problems (Egan 2002). This strategy calls for concentration on opportunities that are there or that arise as a way of overcoming property inheritance problems. The way out of this problem will act as
an exit door out of their situation. Applying this strategy implies that it is essential for social workers to help widows move away from a problem focus to a solution focus.

3.2 The Roles Of The Social Worker

A role refers to the ways in which a social worker can act (Weyers 1997). The social worker can assume many roles depending on the problem being dealt with or depending on the needs of the client. In the exit strategy, the social worker may assume the role of an outreach worker where the social worker reaches out to detect widows with problems so that they can be helped to find solutions. The social worker will then assume the role of a collaborator in which the social worker will work together with the widows to solve the problem. The social worker may refer the clients to other service providers if the problem can be solved by other professionals. For example, in the case of women whose property has been stripped, the social worker can refer them to legal practitioners for legal advice. The social worker can then make a follow up to make sure their problem has been attended to.

While widows struggle to find solutions for their problems, the social worker needs to occupy the role of a guide so that they will be able to find helpful solutions. In describing this role in relation to community work, Swanepoel (1997:40) advises that:

Community workers know of pitfalls and obstacles the people are not aware of. It is therefore their task to guide the people through these pitfalls towards objectives that may be somewhat murky to the action groups… At the same time, their positions should never make the people dependent on them. Therefore their role does not entitle them to lead from the front. They are not guiding blind or crippled people. At best, community workers are ‘co-travelers’ on the road of discovery.

The social worker must be an enabler where the practitioner aims to ‘enable the people to fulfill their abstract human needs, to enhance their learning processes and to help them gain meaningful empowerment’ (Swanepoel1997:42). In their enabling role, social workers must remove obstacles, steer clear of trouble and provide know-how to make it possible for widows to act and move out of the problem themselves - they are there to make things happen without being active themselves. Social workers can also be facilitators. The concern for social workers is to help widows make rational decisions, in taking the initiative, to help them to discover their resources and to help them to plan and act. Swanepoel (1997:43) sums up the definition of facilitation and asserts that it involves ‘helping, assisting, aiding, enabling nothing more than that.

3.3 Voice Strategy And Empowerment

It has always been a concern for advocates that widows who experience property stripping have not been accorded the opportunity to voice their concerns. Due to this reason the voice strategy can be most useful. Cooke & Ellis (2004) contend that empowerment through voice uses a democratic approach where widows are allowed and given an opportunity to speak out about their problems. Using this strategy will enable widows to express their opinions concerning property inheritance. This requires an atmosphere and an environment where widows are free to articulate their concerns. However, in cases where widows cannot speak for themselves, the social worker can speak on their behalf, advocating for their needs and concerns.
The development of advocacy as an additive to empowerment strategies has been described by Cooke & Ellis (2004:150) as ‘a process aiming to help people access support, articulate their needs, receive the services they require, and secure their rights’. Articulation of needs and securing of rights by women is central to women’s property inheritance issues. This process has been termed self-advocacy (Cooke & Ellis 2004) and is linked, through self-determination, to empowerment, both individually and collectively (p 150). On the other hand Cooke & Ellis (2004) expressed a contradicting view of self –advocacy in that merely being offered an opportunity to express an opinion does not necessarily equate to having the power to effect change.

3.3 The Roles Of The Social Worker

Trevithick (2005) comments that where there is a need for voices of the widows to be heard by people who seem to be unresponsive, the social worker may assume the role of an advocate. Unresponsive people may be people occupying very important and influential social positions such as local village heads, chiefs and legal practitioners. Advocacy is a term borrowed from the field of law in which the social work advocate obtains authority from a given mandatory power or goal of the organization by which he is employed to plead and fight for services, policies, rules, regulations and laws for clients’ benefit (Farley, Smith & Boyle 2006). It involves representing the interests of the widows when they are unable to do so themselves. It is important to note that in situations where widows may take the initiative for advocacy themselves, the social worker empowers them by becoming a supporter.

According to Lombard (1991) the social worker occupying the advocacy role is not an impartial enabler, broker, expert, consultant, guide or social therapist: he is a partisan who supports and fights for the inheritance rights of the widows. The role of an advocate can be equated with the role of a biased supporter. When occupying this role, the social worker has to play the role of defendant of the rights and interests of the widows (Farley et. al. 2006).

A key concept in advocacy is that of representation, in which the social worker supports the widows in representing themselves, argues their views and needs, interprets or represents the views, needs, concerns and their interests and develops appropriate skills for understanding such as listening and negotiating skills, empathy, assertiveness skills and being clear and focused (Trevithick 2005).

Representation of other people can take many forms. Payne (1997:269) as quoted by Trevithick (2005) summarizes representation as case advocacy where a professional, volunteer or peer advocates on behalf of another person for resources, services or opportunities and cause advocacy which involves arguing for changes in policies or procedures and other forms of reform. This can be a more direct form of advocacy that can bring changes in the practice of property stripping in African societies. Self- advocacy on the other hand puts more responsibility and power on the affected person or group of people to speak and represent themselves. Widows may find ways of speaking for themselves in order to protect their rights and to advance their own interests. This links to self-help, group and peer advocacy. In peer advocacy the widows need to work together to represent each other’s interests. This type of representation involves the formation of groups such as self-help groups or support groups in the advocacy process. This can be equated to membership which is critical for the empowerment of the clients in social work. To describe the value and role of membership, Saleeby (2002:10) argues that:

“… to be without membership is to be alienated, to be at risk for marginalization and oppression. …… people must band together to make their voices heard, to get their needs met, to redress inequalities and to reach their dreams.”
One other important form of advocacy is citizen advocacy which involves volunteers in developing relationships with isolated people, understanding and representing their needs. However, it is important to note that this kind of advocacy will be possible to undertake where people understand that property stripping is violence and oppressive and that there is a need to represent the victims.

The social worker can also be an activist. This role can be understood to be a step beyond that of an advocate and has a strong political component. The concept “activist” means amongst others ‘crusader, fighter and champion’ (Lombard 1991, Farley et. al 2006). Activism arises when the social worker realizes that his efforts on behalf of the widows demand partiality and taking sides (Farley et. al. 2006). Thus the social worker occupying this role has to be on the side of the widows.

3.4 The Rights Strategy And Empowerment

Widows’ property inheritance rights have been reverberated in the study. Due to this reason, this strategy is at the core on which widows’ rights to property inheritance rests. It is the backbone of all the strategies that can be used to empower widows with the problem of property stripping. The rights theorists contend that this strategy has backing of international legal and institutional reforms. Yet they are underutilized in African communities due to the patriarchal nature of the society.

Cooke & Ellis (2004:149) describe the rights strategy as the ‘preferred strategy… since it is based on the adoption of universal rights for all’. This approach is not only essential for the empowerment of widows but also for those protecting them in terms of guaranteeing them reasonable protection against abuse, exploitation and deprivation of property rights. In light of the practical limitations of different versions of empowerment, Means & Smith (1998) as cited by Cooke & Ellis (2004) suggest that for many people empowerment can only be achieved through a process of ‘struggle’ in challenging the realities of power relations. It is however, important to acknowledge the fact that in African societies, rights advocacy is everywhere up against the patriarchal nature of society. Taylor et. al. (1992) as quoted by Cooke & Ellis (2004) defined empowerment by using a ‘ladder’ which outlines the degree of power given or taken by users

People are empowered to different degrees when they have access to information, control over resources alongside power and authority to use them in achieving their purposes as can be illustrated by Figure 1 above. ‘While all these represent rungs on a ‘ladder’, the social worker needs to ensure that each user is as near the top as possible’ (Cooke & Ellis 2004:150).

The rights strategy taps the mission of the Beijing Platform of Action (1995) which respects and values the full diversity of women's situations and conditions and recognizes that some women face particular barriers to their empowerment. When using this strategy, it is important to take into cognizance that full realization of all human rights and fundamental freedoms of all women is essential for the empowerment of women. Social workers need to make sure that women’s rights are considered to the highest possible degree. Social workers have a vital role to play in the struggle that widows face as they can be deployed either to assist or to obstruct that struggle (Cooke & Ellis 2004).

3.5 Roles Of The Social Worker

The rights of women have become a concern for conventional social work practice in African society because of increasing violation of their rights. The roles social workers play when applying the rights strategy are very fundamental and crucial as the majority of women
in our society are deprived of information because they are not educated or have received limited education. The discussion that follows will outline the roles social workers can play when applying the rights strategy.

As an educator, the social worker assists women in determining the causes of property stripping and in considering possible solutions. Farley et al. (2006:123) describe this as having an important component of ‘increasing human capacity’ which is integral to the philosophy behind social work. Increasing the capacity of the widows can in itself be a strong tool for enabling them to solve the problem of property stripping. The social worker discusses the rights of widows to inherit property as provided by the constitution and succession laws. Further, the social worker can teach them about their rights and responsibilities. This aspect of educating women about their right to inherit property is very fundamental as women continue to be deprived of their rights in the African communities. This alludes to the fact that education on the rights of women needs to be strengthened.

Social workers can be advisors. Due to their greater knowledge and broader view, social workers must give advice to the widows. Swanepoel (1997:41) warns that ‘empowerment becomes hollow rhetoric if people are starved of information to the extent that they cannot make informed decisions’. Playing this role will mean that social workers advise women of the choices within their rights and the consequences of such choices. The social worker may for example, refer the widows to legal practitioners for legal advice if widows decide to take legal action. They need to be conduits, passing information on to the widows but Swanepoel (1997) warns social workers never to tell people what to do and not to do.

4. METHODS AND MATERIALS

The design and methodology of the study was influenced by radical feminist theory which attributes the suffering of women to the power imbalances in society. From the radical feminist perspective, women need to be emancipated from the patriarchal systems of the society which oppresses them (Collins 2000), one of which is customary law. The research design and methodology sought to answer the research questions centred on the property inheritance experiences of widows, the empowerment needs of widows and how social workers could intervene in situations of property stripping. The researcher divided it into the following categories: research method, population and sampling strategy, data collection, and data analysis.

4.1 Research method

A qualitative method was utilised to enable ‘systematic investigations that include inductive, in-depth, nonquantitative studies’ of property grabbing from the widows (Thyer 2001:257). The aim was ‘describing, making sense of, interpreting or reconstructing’ the experiences of the widows (Schurink 1998:240).

4.2 The Population

Gray (2005:82) defines a population as ‘the total number of possible units or elements that are included in the study’. Robson (2002:260) provides a summary definition when he defines a population as referring to ‘all the cases’. The population for this study comprised of all widows in the Sikalenge ward widows who experienced property grabbing. Since the researcher could not interview all the widows from Sikalenge ward, a sample was drawn from them to determine participants for this study.
4.3 Sampling Strategy

Strydom (2005:194) A sample is defined as ‘elements of the population considered for actual inclusion in the study, or it can be viewed as a subsequent of measurements drawn from a population in which we are interested’ (Strydom 2005:194, Fouche & De Vos 1998; Bless and Higson-Smith 2000).

The study utilised a non-probability purposive sampling strategy to involve ten participants in the study. The ten who widows who participated in individual interviews of the study experienced property grabbing. Purposive sampling is based on the ‘judgement of the researcher that a sample has typical elements which contain the most typical attributes of the population’ (Strydom & De Vos 1998:198; Alston & Bowles 2003). The ten widows were accessed through Ntengwe for Community Development Trust, an organisation in Binga District, which runs several projects for widows and orphans.

The arrangements for contacts in the homes of the ten widows were made through the Programme Officer of Ntengwe for Community Development Trust. This was conducive to a trusting relationship between the researcher and the participants, enabling the participants to have confidence in the researcher which was crucial to information gathering (Schurink 1998). However, snowballing (Gray 2005, Strydom 2005) was to a particular extent used as widows who participated in the study were also helpful in locating other homes of fellow participants that the researcher and the programme officer of Ntengwe for Community Development Trust could not locate themselves for appointments.

4.4 Data Collection

This study utilised semi-structured one-on-one interviews to collect data from the participants. Interviews as a method of collecting data were suitable as the researcher was interested in getting first-hand information from the participants as they related their property inheritance experiences. Further, the interviews enabled the researcher to understand the world from the participants’ point of view and uncover their lived experiences (Greeff 2005). This research stance seemed to be consistent with that of Seidman (1998:1) as quoted by Greeff (2005:287) who maintains that ‘you interview because you are interested in other people’s stories’. Before data were collected by the researcher, prior arrangements for the date and time of the interviews were made with each participant of the individual interview and due consideration was given to privacy, confidentiality and a non-condemning atmosphere (Cournoyer & Klein 2000).

The instrument used to collect data was the interview schedule. These interviews were semi-structured. The researcher administered individual interviews himself in order to control the environment and to develop an empathic understanding of the participants’ feelings (Alston & Bowles 2003). By administering the interviews himself, the researcher was able to observe the behaviour and body language such as gestures of the respondents (Gray 2005). The interviews with the widows were done in the Tonga language, the language spoken in Binga so as to prevent communication problems and enable participants to express themselves well.

The researcher conducted the individual interviews in the homes of the participants. The interviews were audio taped by the researcher and latter transcribed. The individual Tonga audio taped interviews are labelled ‘Tonga’ on the tapes while those for the focus group interviews are labelled ‘English’. Robson (2002:289) encourages the use of tapes in interviews when he argues that ‘the tape provides a permanent record and allows you to concentrate on the interview’.

The ten audio taped and translated interviews were transcribed verbatim into English by the researcher. During the making of transcriptions, the researcher merged the answers to
the prompts with those to the main question since prompts aid the researcher to get the right answer for the main question. Transcriptions were proof read by the Schools Psychological Services and Special Needs Education Officer at the Binga Ministry of Education Office. Pseudo names were used to maintain confidentiality of the widows (Alston & Bowels 2003) whilst for focus group participants, titles only were used.

4.5 Data Analysis

Data was analysed directly by listening to tapes and then placing information according to the relevant thematic areas. Using an interpretive approach, analysis of data started with data reduction, data organisation and then data interpretation with the backup of existing theory (Alston & Bowles 2003). From the literature read on property inheritance and widowhood, the researcher was able to find the link between the responses of the participants and the findings from other research studies and theoretical positions of other writers. Consultation of literature served as a control and helped the researcher to identify similarities and differences between the findings and the consulted literature.

In data reduction, data were summarised and categorised in order to identify important aspects of the issue being researched (Alston & Bowles 2003). Summarising and categorising data began soon after the researcher had made some transcripts and listened carefully to the participants’ information to generate themes or issues (Bazeley & Richards 2006). The process also involved picking up words, phrases and ideas directly from the text as the participants expressed themselves and the data were labelled or given their tags (Robson 2002).

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The results and discussion of the empowerment needs of the widows are presented in the paragraphs that follow. The discussion follows the themes that comprised the study.

5.1 Empowerment Needs Of The Widows

The participants were asked their need for economic empowerment. The responses were: ‘

I need money to start a small business that will help me generate income for my daily needs such as food and many other things. This will caution against the economic hardships I am facing now’, (Nomai).

‘Economically, I need money to start self-help projects. This will help me generate income for daily needs’, (Otilia).

All ten participants said they needed economic empowerment. All indicated that they needed finance for various purposes. Three participants needed money to buy food, children’s clothes and to pay for their children’s education. Seven participants wanted money for starting self-help and income generating projects like small businesses to relieve themselves from poverty. Economic needs are among the most pressing needs for widows. Upon property grabbing, economic resources get depleted for sustenance. Wilcox (2006) argues that economic independence among women will result in a decrease of violence against women and a wider alleviation of poverty.

5.2 Social Empowerment
The participants were asked to describe their social empowerment needs. Of the ten participants, five said their social life was satisfying. They said they were not experiencing any problems in interacting with other people. By contrast, the International Committee of the Red Cross (2006) maintains that women can be left entirely without social status when they lose their husbands, especially in patriarchal societies and may be stigmatized by other members of society.

Five participants, however, indicated that they needed social empowerment. They evinced reduced self-esteem and poor interaction with other people. Among the practical needs the widows said they needed social skills and wished also to be able to mix with married people so as not to feel so different from them. The participants were stigmatized as widows. The stigma was worsened by property grabbing leaving them in poverty. Rao Guprer (2000) recommends the importance of increasing social support for widows by giving them opportunities to meet in groups that are visible in communities to discuss matters affecting their wellbeing.

5.3 Health Empowerment Needs

When asked about their health empowerment needs, seven participants indicated that they needed health empowerment. The participants had various worries concerning their health. Among the health problems were asthma cases, HIV cases, heart problems and backaches. Braitha had this to say concerning her health status:

[M]y health has been disturbed as well. At times I feel that my heart is tired. I will say that, IF I THINK ABOUT IT, IT GIVES ME HEART PROBLEMS.

The widows need health empowerment as most often they worry about their life expectancy as they complained that they could not afford the medical expenses and special diets. Inability to pay for medication and special diets are other health woes for those infected by HIV/AIDS. Sometimes they think that they would not live long enough to see their children grow. With reference to the women in Twabidi in Ghana, Kunfay, Dogbe, MacKay & Marshall (2002:33) argue that:

[P]hysical health is vital for the types of livelihoods on which poor people depend, and they worry immensely about the prospect of illness or injury, which are costly in terms of both lost earnings and medical care.

5.4 Psychological Empowerment

The study also sought to find out about the widows’ psychological needs. The responses of the widows give evidence to the need for psychological help. Their responses were:

‘Psychologically, I think I need help from other people especially on the ever troubling thoughts of educating my children. I feel counseling on this one will lower my thoughts because my children’s education troubles me very much. I ask myself several questions some of which I can not answer’, (Mary).
‘I have psychological instability as well. This is brought about by ever bombarding thoughts of how to manage the diet, medication and money for my daughter’s education. These cross in my mind and give me psychological problems. I think I need counseling here’, (Chipo).

Abused women suffer serious psychological harm. Even in instances where abuse has been physical, the extent of psychological damage cannot be overemphasized. There is then a need for psychological empowerment. All ten respondents said they needed psychological empowerment. Psychological pain began with the death of their husbands and was then exacerbated by property grabbing. The widows also reported psychological pain to be a result of thinking hard about caring for the orphaned children. In an endeavour to deal with the psychological problems of the widows, Safieddin (1999) suggests the need to activate family counseling to solve widows’ psychological problems. An interesting finding in the study on how widows cope with their situations was prayer. The widows reported prayer to be powerful enough for them to cope with the problem of property grabbing. The power of prayer led Mary to resort to prayers as a coping tool. Mary had this to say:

‘I survive through PRAYERS (emphasized) from my church until I feel better’.

Miller (2003) sees the importance of prayer and recommends its use where the client uses religion to cope and does not doubt the use of prayer during counseling sessions to be empowering.

5.3 Educational Empowerment Needs

The educational need also needs consideration in view of the nature of society and its patriarchal attitudes towards women. Given greater illiteracy and the skewed gender preference for education in our society, Kevane (2004:145) slates that an ‘investment in education will yield high social returns and investments in girls even more so’. Little education among women impacts negatively in a dynamic society and keeps them uninformed about new laws and policies as well as about means for survival. Ishengoma (2005) found that in Morogoro Region of Tanzania sixty percent of the women provided farm labour, yet agricultural and development-related work by passed them and they lacked information on further training. In the study, the participants had this to say:

‘In terms of education, I need to be taught on will-writing so that when I die my children will not have these few things that I have, chicken, goats, pots and blankets, stripped away from them’, (Nomai).

‘Educationally, I need help because nowadays one can not have a prosperous life without education. I want to learn cutting and designing so that I can use my own hands to help myself’, (Nomia).

‘In terms of education, I need education in agriculture so that I can be able to grow food for my children. I need special education in growing vegetables in the garden so that I know
how best to grow them. Vegetables are a good source of income’, (Mary).

Nine of the participants indicated their need for educational empowerment. Only one widow said she did not need any education given her age. Steady (2006) argues that educating women enables and increases their chances of being independent from men economically and hence it is very important for women.

The need for education centred on sustenance. Self-help projects such as cutting and designing, education in agriculture for growing food and starting small businesses were some areas where women needed empowerment. Another important part of their educational empowerment concerned knowledge building among the widows. These included formal educational aspects such as computer courses to enable young widows to be employed. The other form of education needed was knowledge about will writing so as to safeguard their children from property grabbing. In Wilcox’s (2006:175) view, ‘training and further education would also be vital to encourage women to develop more advanced skills to ultimately gain economic independence’.

6. CONCLUSION

The study aimed at finding out the empowerment needs of the widows experiencing property grabbing. With regards to this aim, the study discussed in depth the empowerment needs of the widows. When widows cannot inherit property from their deceased husbands, many of their aspects in life are compromised and upset. In the study, a host of needs amass the widows’ life and required professional social work intervention. They include social, psychological, educational, and economic and health needs. Social work practitioners should pay close attention to the findings of this study. The empowerment approach and strategies can be useful in addressing the empowerment needs of the widows. These can be useful for influencing programmes, policies and service delivery.

REFERENCES


