RISK AND RESILIENCE: GHANAIAN (AKAN) WIDOWS AND PROPERTY RIGHTS

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative phenomenological study investigated Akan widows’ lived experiences of widowhood, widowhood rites, violations against their property rights and the protective resources they employ to survive. The dissertation also explored how the widows make meaning out of their experiences. Twenty widows were selected. They ranged in age from 30 to 81, rural/urban dwelling, education, monogamous/polygamous marriage, different widowhood experiences, Christian/Muslim and employed/unemployed status. Participants were drawn from 2 towns and 2 cities in 2 regions in Ghana. Through collaborative, communicative interviewing tools, the widows provided descriptions, perspectives and the meaning they make out of their lived experiences. Findings confirm that Akan widows’ vulnerability is directly connected with the social location of Akan women based on the gendered socialization and culturally asymmetrical roles in marriage; culturally gendered challenges they face during widowhood, lack of property and poverty; and the conflicting stipulations of the plural legal systems in Ghana. Factors identified as supportive resources for widows’ continuous survival include religiosity/spirituality, economic stability, social capital/networks and self-sufficiency. The findings also show that, all but 5 widows were struggling financially and personally. The implications of the findings in relation to policy and practice are discussed, as well as the strengths and limitations of the study.

KEYWORDS: Widowhood, widowhood rites, social location, property rites, matrilineal lineage.
I dedicate this doctoral study to very important people in my life. I dedicate this dissertation to my family. To my husband, Michael and our children, Paa, Nana, Papa, Maame & Naa Sei, I cannot imagine finishing this work without you. Your love, care, and encouragement; your trust in me that I could do it; your wonderful prayer support, time and contributions served as a driving force for the completion of this dissertation. I dedicate this doctoral study to the memory of my parents, Anthony Kwasi Osei and Grace Adwoa Afra, who instilled in me the value and importance of education. Maa Afra, you never entered the classroom but you knew the importance of education for your children. Thank you, Mom. To you widows out there, especially the 20 Akan widows who shaped the structure and body of this dissertation with your astounding stories, I dedicate this work to you. Thank you all for your various contributions to make me the person I am today.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Discriminatory property rights laws and andocentric traditional, cultural and social customs have restricted Akan women and many women from many other African cultures, from ownership of assets. Property ownership is the most fundamental instrument to women’s economic independence, empowerment and liberation from abusive relationships (Hampel-Milagrosa, 2009; Joireman, 2006; Pandey, 2003; Roy & Tisdell, 2002). According to Human Rights Watch (2004), millions of women around the world, especially those in developing countries, such as Ghana, suffer abuses of their equal rights to own, inherit, manage, and dispose of property.

Within the Akan lineage in Ghana, women may inherit property only through men, typically their husbands, but they lose those rights when their relationships with the men end through death or divorce (Abbas, 1997; Awusabo-Asare, 1990; von Struensee, 2004; Ewelukwa, 2002). Thus, widows from the Akan lineage, especially those in rural areas, frequently lose their possessions and are evicted from their matrimonial homes, leaving them and their children in deplorable conditions. These widows’ vulnerable situation reflects multiple marginalized identities, lived experiences of subordination, discrimination and oppression (Awusabo-Asare, 1990; Ewelukwa, 2002). Yet, many widows do resist oppression and survive. Understanding the culturally-embedded personal, spiritual/religious, social and legal resources they employ to successfully continue their lives is an important prerequisite towards the development of effective supportive interventions.

This qualitative phenomenological study examines Ghanaian (Akan) widows’ lived experiences of widowhood and property rights violations. Women in Ghana form about 51.5 percent of the total population of 22.2 million (Ghana Living Standard Survey, GLSS 5, 2008), constitute 52% of the labor force and 90% of the labor force in marketing of farm products, produce
70% of subsistence crops and perform almost all of reproductive work (WDI database, 2004; Ghana 2000 population census). Yet discriminatory property rights laws, androcentric traditional, cultural and social customs exclude them from direct property inheritance.

When their husbands die, these widows, especially those in the rural areas, frequently lose their possessions and are evicted from their matrimonial homes, leaving them and their children in deplorable, at-risk conditions. Thus, most widows and their children live in extreme poverty. Extreme poverty in most cases leaves widows and their children, particularly their daughters in extremely vulnerable situations which sometimes become the decisive factors for their daughters marrying much older men at a very young age. They then become young widows themselves (Owen, 2001), thus recreating the cycle of poverty in their own lives and in the next generation.

Poverty may force many widows to withdraw their children from school and expose them to child labor and/or prostitution so that they can contribute to the family income as well as be able to cater for themselves. The widows’ lack of landed property (including housing) affects their access to other resources, such as capital, health and education (Agarwal, 1994a; Pandey, 2003; Tinker & Summerfield, 1999). These constraints further impact negatively on their self-confidence, independence and well-being as well as their ability to contribute to household decision-making. I therefore argue that, Ghanaian widows’ vulnerability is embedded in the socio-cultural and legal milieu of the country and constitutes a variety of risky challenges that impact on their lives.

**Rationale for the Study**

Akan widows’ vulnerability is embedded in the complexities of Ghana’s plural legal system, where the Ghana’s statutory law and the indigenous customary laws rule side-by-side. Akan customary laws governing marriage, property, property rights and succession exclude women, and

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1 Extreme poverty goes beyond ‘living under $1 a day’ to include lack of voice, shelter, basic needs, education, employable skills,
the statutory laws also fail to protect their rights leaving widows vulnerable, poor and voiceless (Opare, 2005; International Finance Corporation/World Bank Group, 2007). The basic norms and practices associated with customary marriage and property rights place obligations on wives to assist their husbands in their accumulations of property (Danquah, 1928). Thus any property accumulated from such endeavor belongs solely to the husband.

Chapter 12 of Ghana’s Constitution promises to protect the fundamental human rights and freedoms for all people in the country, with no discrimination of race, place of origin, political opinion, color, religion, creed or gender of the individual. Ghana has ratified more than 20 international human rights treaties. Prominent among them in relation to this study is the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), signed on July 17, 1980 and ratified on January 2, 1986.

Despite all these constitutional provisions and ratification of international treaties, gender discrimination and inequalities continue to adversely affect women’s rights in Ghana. Yet, there has been little critical analysis of such inequalities, especially on widow-abuse and violations of their property rights. Rather, those practices have been regarded as part of the customs and traditions of the people. Some articles and publications describe widowhood practices in Ghana and other countries in West Africa (Sossou, 2002; Fenrich & Higgins, 2001, Aborampah, 1999, Awusabo-Asare, 1990), but examining Akan widows’ perspectives on their experiences of widowhood challenges and their rights to property as well as their survival strategies remain a missing gap.

It is therefore significant to examine the widows’ described experiences of their marriages, obligations of widowhood and challenges they deal with as widows (physical, economical, psychological, cultural and legal), while focusing on violations of their property rights. Secondly, providing rich contextual descriptions of these widows’ multidimensional identities and social
locations, has allowed them the opportunity for their voices to be heard as well as understand the intersections of these identities which render them relatively more or less vulnerable, marginalized and/or privileged. In addition, exploring the widows’ strategies of survival, that is, the resources they employ for continuous survival, their well-being and functioning serves as implications for policy, practice, education and research.

This study attempted obtaining rich contextualized descriptions of these widows’ experiences, challenges as well as the strategies they employ to survive and continue their lives following bereavement and the loss of property. The study focused on Akan widows, arguably among the most vulnerable. They are not only evicted from their matrimonial homes, as described by some of the widows interviewed, they are also usually subjected to the observance of culturally constructed gendered widowhood rites (Awusabo-Asare, 1990; Ewelukwa, 2002; Sossou, 2002). Widowhood rites include compulsory fasting, eating once or twice a day, bathing in cold water thrice daily, public crying for the first forty days following bereavement, confinement to a room for forty days and wearing black for at least a year after bereavement (Korang-Okrah, 2007/08). Such practices normally place widows in disadvantaged, vulnerable and dependant positions, where they may experience social exclusion, and economical, physical and psychological abuse (Sossou, 2002). Compounding the widows’ plight is the complexities of Ghana’s pluralistic legal system, which fails to protect the rights and dignity of the vulnerable widows as well as support them. It is therefore important to take an intersectional approach, recognizing the overlapping power structures as well as the causes and impacts of widowhood, discrimination and vulnerability.

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2 A person’s social location refers to his or her place in society that is formed by the intersection of socially constructed identities that mark privilege and oppression which is essential in capturing the complexity of that person’s experiences, actions, choices and outcome.

3 Widowhood rite is one of the rites-of-passage an Akan woman goes through/observes when widowed.
Theoretical Frameworks: The Intersectional & Resilience Perspectives

To capture the depth and breadth of Akan widows’ multi-dimensional experiences, I approached this study from two theoretical perspectives, intersectionality and resilience.

The Intersectionality theory was applied to identify and understand the widows’ multiple, layered identities, their social locations and subsequent lived experiences of challenges confronting them as widows. The Resilience theory, on the other hand, was employed to examine the widows’ descriptions of adjustment processes and the survival sources they employ for continuous survival, well-being and functioning.

Conceptualized primarily as a Black feminists’ theory and a methodology for research, intersectionality starts from the premise that, human [lived] experience is complex and consists of multiple, layered identities resulting from social relations, history and the operations of structures of power (AWID² 2004; Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 1990; McCall, 2005). Black feminist theorists argue strongly that, socially constructed categories of oppression and privilege, such as race, class, gender and age simultaneously interact to create unique life experiences for marginalized populations. Feminist women of color, according to Murphy, Hunt, Zajicek, Norris & Hamilton (2009), argue strongly that race, class and gender are inseparable determinants of inequalities that interdependently form interlocking patterns which in turn serve as the bases for developing multiple systems of domination. Consequently, that affects people’s access to power and privileges, influence [their] social relationships and shape their everyday experiences (Murphy et al, 2009).

Intersectionality offers explanations related to the complexities of human experience as marked by social constructions of privilege and oppression (Murphy et al, 2009). For instance, Akan widows, like widows in other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, are confronted with challenges of multiple identities, experiences of subordination and discrimination (von Struensee, 2004;
Ewelukwa, 2002; Awusabo-Asare, 1990). Right from birth, girls are confronted with sociocultural constraints through gendered, stratified socialization process in which characteristics such as virility, authority, power, leadership qualities, intelligence, etc., are encouraged in boys. Girls are expected to differ from boys and their socialization focuses on household chores (Boateng, Adomako-Ampofo, Flanagan, Gallay & Yakah, 2006). Thus, girls’ rights and opportunities to access resources such as education, food/nutrition, health and economic support are limited relative to boys (Boateng et al., 2006). Such situations create social inequality, a condition whereby people have unequal access to valued resources, services and positions in society (Kerbo, 2003). In essence, such processes result in social exclusion of groups and individuals by the construction of identity markers, the resulting hierarchical relations and the use of power and privilege.

The intersectionality perspective provided an ecological framework for understanding and analyzing the widows’ descriptions of their complex and layered identities of their lived experiences. The multiplicities surrounding their lived experiences were captured and analyzed through the lens of this feminist theory. This perspective according to Shields (2008), reveals that the individual’s social identities profoundly influence one’s beliefs about and experience of gender, thus, individual’s social locations as reflected in intersecting identities must be at the forefront in any investigation of gender (p. 301). The intersectionality perspective therefore challenges the former feminists’ perspective for doing research. This is because intersectionality has transformed how gender is discussed and understood in the context of power relations embedded in social identities (Collins, 2000; Shields, 2008). Intersectionality therefore is the most important contribution of feminist theory to the present understanding of gender (McCall, 2005).

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4 Examining, analyzing or understanding identities such as gender and race independently instead focusing on their interaction.
However, at this stage of its development, challenges associated with intersectionality include achieving a consensus on a common language for the various key concepts as well as clarity in defining the concepts (Collins, 2000; McCall, 2005). There have been some discussions on the agreement of the extent to which intersectionality qualifies as a theory and a methodological paradigm (Landry, 2006; McCall, 2005; Phoenix and Pattynama, 2006; Davis, 2008). For instance, Landry (2006) remarks that, although there are assumptions and hypotheses associated with intersectionality, insufficient empirical testing positions intersectionality to fall short of being considered as a theory (as cited in Murphy, e al, 2009). McCall’s (2005) concern is particularly on the methodological approaches to the application of intersectionality in the areas of research and analysis.

According to Shields (2008), the intersectionality paradigm has assumed a significant position in thinking about gender and that, as a foundation for theory, intersectionality promises a more accurate and tractable way of dealing with two issues. Intersectionality promises a solution that is “a language for the obvious fact that, it is impossible to talk about gender without considering other dimensions of social structure/social identity that play a formative role in gender’s operation and meaning” (Shields, 2008, p.303). Most behavioral research focusing on intersectionality, especially those using quantitative techniques employ intersectionality as a perspective on research rather than as a theory that drives the research questions. Intersectionality then is construed in terms of multiple group membership, in which case its emergent properties and processes escape attention (Shields, 2008). Consequently, the available methodological tools can obstruct a view of how radical a transformation of thinking about the processes is needed to incorporate intersectionality meaningfully (Bowleg, 2008; Shields, 2008).
Methodologically, intersectionality could be viewed in limited terms, such as a 2 x 2 study of sexual orientation and gender. Viewed in this way, the analysis of the variance framework could show a picture of how one variable, e.g., gender, influences and is influenced by the effects of another variable, such as age and social class (Shields, 2008). The problem with this kind of analysis is that it does not go far enough. According to Shields, we need to go further to appreciate the dependence of one category’s definition on the other and vice versa than to settle for the identification of points of mutual effect. Methodological solution to the ongoing debate about intersectionality, according Shields, “is to rely more heavily on qualitative methods because they appear to be more compatible with the theoretical language and intent of intersectionality” (Shields, 2008, p. 306). This is because most qualitative researchers have the goal of describing the forms and processes of relations among categories of phenomena and the themes and units of meaning relevant to these relations. Taken this stance makes the “qualitative researcher more open to emergent phenomena than the quantitative researcher whose work is driven by hypotheses determined a priori” (Shields, 2008, p. 306).

However, there is no “one-size-fits-all methodological solution to incorporating an intersectionality perspective (Shields, 2008; McCall, 2005; Walker, 2003). For instance, some research questions may be more usefully addressed by an intersectionality model than others. The intersectionality model requires that identity categories be studied in relation to one other. The facts of intersectionality at the individual, interpersonal and structural level compel us to be also mindful of the specific historical and contextual features of individual identity categories (Shields, 2008).

Resilience, the ability to function in the face of adversity, is an important framework in western research with vulnerable populations. Nevertheless, “the construct [of resilience] remains largely unknown outside a few Western, English-speaking nations” (Ungar, 2010, p. 404). Thus, for
decades, most resilience researchers and the literature dealing with the construct of resilience have focused on individual outcomes in relation to factors that define healthy functioning from the “western-based” perspective. Community and cultural factors that are important in the contextualization of how resilience is defined and experienced in people’s everyday practices and throughout their life span have been lacking (Ungar, 2004, 2005; Boyden and Mann, 2005).

For about a decade now, an international team of resilience researchers from 14 sites (countries) in six continents, led by Dr. Michael Ungar, a Social Work Professor at Dalhousie University in Canada, have employed methodologically diverse approaches to study how children, youth and adults cope with many different kinds of adversity in diverse contexts. They focused on the coping patterns within stressful environments, illustrating mechanisms that mitigate the impact of risk and promote well-being (Ungar, 2005; 2010). The focus of the Resilience Research Center (RRC) is to study the social and physical ecologies that make resilience more likely to occur. The researchers, using mixed methodologies, try to understand both similarities and differences across cultures and contexts in how resilience is understood and ways to intervene and help children and youth who face significant levels of risk (Linda Liebenberg, the RRC’s Director of Research).

Resilience, according to Ungar (2010), is a conceptual nameplate for a body of research and interventions focused on positive development outcomes among populations that face substantial amount of risk. Resilience is typically used in two ways, as an outcome and as an engagement in protective processes. As an outcome, resilience is associated with the acquisition of both internal and external assets that work together to enhance the effectiveness of physical and mental well-being when the individuals are exposed to varying degrees of psychosocial stress (Ungar, 2010).

The construct could be used to indicate engagement in protective processes associated with development of preferred outcome. Referring to an individual as showing resilience is an indication
that, the individual is participating in processes that lead to well-being under stress. Processes that have positive developmental outcomes from the RRC’s study are diverse and include “promoting self-esteem through relationships, augmenting access to health-enhancing resources, such as mentors, social support, meaningful employment and positive cultural identity” (Ungar, 2010, 405).

Findings from the 14 site-study with over 1500 youth globally support four propositions that underlie a more culturally and contextually embedded understanding of resilience, that:

1) There are global, as well as culturally and contextually specific aspects to people’s lives that contribute to their resilience;

2) Aspects of resilience exert differing amounts of influence on an individual’s life depending on the specific culture and context in which resilience is realized;

3) Aspects of people’s lives that contribute to resilience are related to one another in patterns that reflect an individual’s culture and context; and

4) Tensions between individuals and their cultures and contexts are resolved in ways that reflect highly specific relationships between aspects of resilience (Ungar, 2008).

Given the gap found in the existing literature and based on the findings from the present global studies, Michael Ungar offered a more “culturally and contextually relevant definition of resilience” as:

In the context of exposure to significant adversity, resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their well-being, and their capacity individually and collectively to negotiate for these resources to be provided in culturally meaningful ways.
(Ungar, 2008, p.225)

This ecological definition of resilience prominently presents two principles, navigation and negotiation. Simply put, navigation is explained here as “both a person’s capacity to seek help, (personal agency), as well as the availability of the help sought” (Ungar, 2008, p.225). However,
Ungar (2010) further states that, “navigation cannot only be the individual’s capacity… but the measure of the capacity of service providers, governments, churches, families and communities to help individuals facing significant adversity” (p.405). Therefore, resilience as a process depends on the “physical and social ecologies in which it enfolds, thus, it is necessarily culture-bound by the everyday practices and sociopolitical decisions of one’s society” (Ungar, 2010, p. 405).

Culture is relevant to resilience because of its influence on the availability and accessibility of resources that facilitate positive adaptation. Ungar (2010) referred to culture as the “everyday practices that are ritualized into a set of values and systems of codified beliefs that reflexively perpetuate orderly social relations” (p.405). For positive adaptation, individuals must engage in health sustaining processes and resources in culturally meaningful ways. Thus, negotiation, the second principle of resilience, is understood to mean one’s successful engagement in processes that sustain well-being, not only for physical resources but also for discursive power to define one’s self and coping strategies (Ungar, 2010).

The intersectionality and resilience models that this study employed together provided a framework for understanding the cultural and contextual realities of the Akan widows’ lived experiences of widowhood as well as how they navigate and negotiate for healthy resources for continuous survival, their well-being and functioning.
CHAPTER 2

GHANAIAN SOCIO-CULTURAL AND FAMILY SYSTEMS: THE PLACE OF AKAN WIDOWS

The Socio-Cultural and Family Systems (Lineage) in Ghana

Ghana is culturally, ethnically and linguistically heterogeneous society with over 100 ethnic groups and languages. Akans form the major ethnic group, comprising 52.7% of the population (GLSS 5, 2008) (Map of Ghana showing Akan Areas, Appendix B). Members of an ethnic group share certain beliefs, values and norms because of their common cultural background. Women in Ghana constitute about 51.5% of the population (GLSS 5, 2008). An understanding of Ghana’s social-cultural and family systems, especially the complexities of the customary laws governing marriage, property rights and succession, is essential to an appreciation of the problems facing Ghanaian widows today. The essential characteristic of the Ghanaian social system is the dual but interrelated nature in which contemporary society is grafted onto traditional roots (U.S. Library of Congress, 2003). According to the Ghana Living Standards Survey-Round Five (GLSS 5, 2008), 65% of Ghana’s population (approximately 22.2 million) lives in the rural areas where traditional and ancestral customs and practices are mostly observed. Those living in modern, urban settings still are bound to the traditional society through the kinship system.

In Ghana, “family” refers to individuals related by blood rather than by marriage and lineage is traced either through the female line (matrilineal) or the male line (patrilineal). The term “family” may also be used to describe the nuclear family. However, in Ghana, spouses are not regarded as related to each other. Moreover, historically, the importance of the extended family or lineage as a social institution far exceeded that of the nuclear family. Indeed, even today, the lineage may be “the most important social institution in Ghana” because it:

Constitutes the pivot around which the political and socio-economic organization of
society revolves. . . . It determines one’s beneficial enjoyment of rights in land and other moveable property. It may also affect generally [one’s] rights of succession to hereditary office in the hierarchy of political organization within the traditional system. (Fenrich and Higgins, 2001)

Two types of lineage systems exist in Ghana, matrilineal and patrilineal. Nearly all native Ghanaians belong to one of these systems. However, there are few Ghanaians who belong to the dual-inheritance system which happens when one’s father belongs to the patrilineal and the mother is from the matrilineal system. Although significant differences exist between matrilineal and patrilineal systems, they share many characteristics important to the analysis of widows’ inheritance rights. The common feature shared by the two systems is the preference of males over females in cases of inheritance (Sossou, 2002; Fenrich and Higgins, 2001). In the case of matriliney, inheritance always starts with the uterine\(^5\) brothers and then nephews. Women may inherit only if there are no possible inheritable males. Local identity and individual status, inheritance, succession to property and political offices as well as basic relations within the village community are determined through the Akans’ exogamous matriclan system (Sanders, 1994). This explains why widows can “hardly” inherit their husbands’ property. They and their children are not considered as members of their husbands’ and fathers’ lineage, especially the lineage segment (\(\text{zyafunu kor}z\)). Within the patrilineal families, although the line of inheritance is from father to son, when the children are younger, the brothers of the deceased take over despite the presence of older daughters (Fenrich and Higgins, 2001). Therefore, both matrilineal and patrilineal lineages discriminate against women in cases of succession and inheritance.

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\(^5\) Siblings who share the same mother (same uterus). They could be from same father or different fathers.
Ideologies of Kinship in the Akan Tradition: Abusua

Culturally, the peoples comprising the Akan are homogeneous to a high degree; their traditional political, economic, legal, religious and kinship systems, their geography, material culture, history and art have been documented by many writers, both indigenous and foreign” (Oppong, 1981, p. 28).

There has been more extensive oral than written descriptions of the Akan kinship structures, terminologies, ideologies and relationships which normally is transmitted from mother to children, an indication of children’s affinity to their mother’s lineage. Outstanding characteristics of the Akan kinship system are its dynamic incremental degrees of precision in structural specificity. Terminological exactitude and relational definition were directly linked to a complementary narrowing in the level and affective range of the succession. These discrete units make up the system (McCaskie, 1995). The Akan kinship system consists of three significant units namely, the matriclan (abusua kεseε); the maximal matrilineage (abusua); and the maximal lineage segment (ɔyafunu kor, i.e., ‘uterine siblings’) (McCaskie, 1995).

Every child born to an Akan woman automatically becomes a member of the mother’s matriclan (McCaskie, 1995; Mensah-Sarbah, 1904). The matriclan is the broadest, (territorially dispersed throughout the Akan states), inclusive unit of the kinship system. The matriclan comprises matrilineal clans (n tua or n tua/mmusua, pl.; abusua, sing.) namely, Agona; Asinie; Bretuo or Twidan; Kona, Asokre or Adonten; Aduana or Aborade; Asona and ɔyoko or Anona. Each clan is identified by its proper name and a totem (akraboaa or ahyensodeε) which they believe is symbolic of some characteristics that members of that clan possess or uphold. For instance, I belong to the Bretuo matrilineal clan and I remember when my mother told me about this clan, she included that our totem is the leopard (etwie, ɔsebɔ or krotwiamansa). As an eight-year-old child, I was shocked
as to why this fearful animal should be chosen. She added that this totem symbolizes heroism, benevolence and skillfulness, which members of this clan uphold. She said history has it that whenever members of the Bretuo clan met leopards in the bush, the animals do not harm them because they had some incantation they used to calm the animals. The “dogma” of the Akans consists of a set of beliefs, values, and opinions that shape the way the Akans think, act, and understand the world around them, especially those in the rural areas.

The Akans are native speakers of Twi, one of the major languages spoken in West Africa. Twi is the “unofficial” national language of Ghana; it is spoken by over 10 million people as their first language and well over 17 million people as their second language in West Africa. Apart from the Baule community in La Côte d'Ivoire who speak a dialect of Twi known as Abron, one can hear Twi being spoken in parts of other West African countries like, Togo, Burkina Faso, Benin, Niger and Nigeria, especially by merchants from these countries who regularly visit Ghana for trading purposes. Some aspects of the Twi language as well as the Akan culture could be identified in Creole cultures and languages, like the Limonese Creole English and Jamaican Creole. Despite the unique differences in a number of morphological, phonological and lexical characteristics among these languages, there is a relative homogeneity of the Akan cultures.

**Customary Notions of Marriage**

Ghana is a pro-natal society, therefore marriage, family and childbirth are of great importance in all the lineage systems (Oppong, 1981; Addai-Sundiata, 1996). The family constitutes the main locus of reproduction, production, distribution it serves as the main agent for social control and the basis for assigning reproductive, economic, and noneconomic, political and inheritance roles to individuals. Conceptually, the Akan regard marriage (awadec) as the union between two or more families or communities, first and foremost for procreation, increase in
population of the family, continuity of family tradition and contribution to support the family resources (material, economic, labor, etc.). This conception of marriage differs from how many cultures around the world view it, especially in the West where marriage is between two people and where some couples can decide not have children. In Ghana, all marriages require the consent of the two families involved and it is an essential prerequisite to a valid customary law marriage for the establishment of a permanent relationship between the families of the parties to the marriage (Fenrich & Higgins 2001).

Over the years, marriage had been contracted under the customary laws of the various ethnic groups in Ghana. Two alternatives to the Customary Law Marriage were introduced in Ghana by the British colonial rulers; marriage under the Marriage Ordinance (CAP 127) introduced in 1844 and amended in 1951; and marriage under the Mohammedan Ordinance (CAP 129) introduced in 1907. Various customary laws and practices; the English common law, the Moslem law, and other relevant statutes and laws, all govern and regulate marriage in Ghana. Of these three recognized marriages in Ghana, it is the Marriage under the Ordinance which is strictly monogamous (one man, one wife) registered. The two others - Customary Law Marriage and marriage under the Mohammedan Ordinance are inherently polygamous. Nevertheless, Ordinance marriage does not convey economic rights for women that differ significantly from customary marriage (Fenrich and Higgins, 2001).

Marriage becomes legally accepted when the customary marriage rites are performed completely. In a nutshell, performance of the customary marriage rites happens when parents, family members and friends of both the man and woman to be married gather (normally in the house of the woman’s parents) for the ceremony. In the presence of the people assembled, the father, uncle (or a representative) of the man presents the required items: three bottles of schnapps
(one for the knocking “kẹkẹkẹ” and two for the main ceremony “tiri nsa,” money (it is context specific) and personal items (for the wife-to-be, also context specific) to the father of the woman.

With all this display, the final words, “Yes I agree that you accept these items,” from the wife-to-be “seals” the marriage. Every marriage in Ghana must go through the customary rites before any church weddings and/or court registrations.

Choice of residential type for newly married couples varies. Akan residential patterns for couples go beyond what social anthropologists term as *virilocality* (*also known as patrilocality, i.e.*, the couple resides with or near the husband’s parents) to include *matrilocality* (*also known as uxorilocality, i.e.*, the couple lives with or near the wife’s parents), *avunculocal* (*i.e.*, the couple lives close to husband’s maternal uncle or the matrilineal descent group), *neolocality* (*i.e.*, the couple lives in a new home by the husband and wife) and *duolocality* (*i.e.*, the husband and wife live separately in their own family homes) (Addai-Sundiata, 1996; Crentsil, 2007). In some cases of duolocal residence, the husband establishes a new home for the wife (and their children) but lives elsewhere, even outside his own family home. Duolocal residence may occur for a number of reasons which including instances where the husband is working in another town or country; or the husband is involved in polygynous relationship(s) and so would prefer to go to the wife’s (or wives’) homes rather than have them come to him (Addai-Sundiata, 1996).

Since every marriage is expected to be “fruitful” and procreate, (the number one expectation about marriage), sterility (*bɔnyini*) leads to marital problems which can even end in divorce or polygamy (where the husband may choose to have another wife or wives to bear children for him). Sterility is gendered in that when the marriage doesn’t produce an offspring, it is the woman who is blamed for being sterile. Male infertility is viewed as a private matter, handled with prudence, but that of the female becomes a public problem.
Polygyny, in which a man is permitted to have more than one wife, is the only type of plural marriage known in Ghana. Polygynous marriages are generally highly correlated with economic and political systems where the most important resource is human labor (Klomegah, 1997). Zeitzen, (2008) posits that, “polygamy is, by its nature, a gender issue” (p. 125). The basis of this assertion is the gender asymmetry inherent in such marriages. While a man can marry more wives, the vice-versa is seen as an abomination. Developing nations are “fighting” child marriage. In most cases where child marriage and betrothal in early age are concerns, normally the man involved is a polygamist. While the man can inherit from all the wives (in Ghana, according to PNDC Law111), all the widows have to share whatever part of the property goes to wives when their husband dies intestate. In Ghana, polygamy still remains and has serious and grave implications when it comes to distribution of property upon the death of a man with multiple wives. Ironically, the Intestate Succession Law still remains silent on this thorny issue.

There are some guiding principles in relation to marriage within the Akan lineage. Although the Akan matrilineal system is exogamous in nature, which means marriage outside one’s matrilineal descent group, cross-cousins marriage is acceptable. Parallel-cousins marriage is strictly prohibited. Parallel-cousin refers to people whose mother’s or father’s lineage could be traced to the same matrilineal ancestry. So, one cannot marry a paternal uncle’s (father’s brother) or maternal auntie’s child because they share the same blood (mogya korɔ) through their parents. Therefore any sexual relationship between paternal uncle’s or maternal auntie’s children is regarded as incest, which is considered a taboo with serious consequences. However, cross-cousin marriages – in which one marries one’s maternal uncle’s (mother’s brother), or paternal auntie’s (father’s sister) son or daughter is encouraged. This is because one’s maternal uncle’s children belong to their mother’s lineage and do not share the same blood. Such cross-marriages, as some anthropologists
have observed, could solve some of the Akan inheritance problems (Basehart, 1961). This is because, if one succeeds one’s maternal uncle and at the same time is the husband of the uncle’s daughter, it means that the wife and her family (mother and other siblings – children of the uncle) would be cared for by their father’s inheritor, who is the husband of their daughter/sister. It seems complicated, but it works in reality.

**Akan Customary Laws on Property, Property Rights and Succession**

Discussions of property include concepts such as: *land, land tenure, land tenure system, ownership and rights*. Throughout the course of human history, *land* serves as one of the most important assets and means to sustain livelihood. It is the key and finite resource for most human activities including agriculture, industry, forestry, energy production, settlement, recreation, and water catchments and storage (Codjoe, 2007). *Land use* therefore could be defined as the way in which, and the purposes for which, humans employ the land and its resources (Myer, 1995). Recognized as the fundamental factor of production, land and land-based natural resources have been tightly linked to economic growth and development as well as the focus of continuous planning and management for sustainable development (Myer 1995; Codjoe, 2007). In most countries, however, land is perceived and allotted for three main functions: socio-religious, economic and political. These co-existing land allotments could sometimes become the cause of conflicts and confusion within and between countries, communities or even families due to formulation of insecure, inequitable land policies. For instance, in a situation where the indigenes may wish to preserve a piece of land because of cultural or spiritual values, the government may wish to acquire it for other purposes.

There is a historical underpinning for the different types of land tenure, land administration system, land ownership and property rights prevailing in contemporary Ghana. These have evolved
over time from the interplay of the socio-political organizations of the various tribes/clans and families through trade, wars and amalgamation (merging of the various ethnic groups to become a nation); the advent of colonial rule; post independence politics and urbanization (Akufo-Addo, 2002). The first contact between the Ghanaian peoples and Europeans occurred in the 1450s (Akufo-Addo, 2002). The Portuguese, who were enticed by the rich mineral resources of Ghana (especially, gold), were the first group to arrive in the 1450s and by 1482 they had built a castle at Edina (Elmina). They were followed by the Dutch in 1598. During the next few centuries, different parts of the area were controlled by the British, Portuguese and the Scandinavian powers, but ultimately the British dominated when the Dutch (the last group to leave) finally withdrew in 1874, giving “room” for Britain to make the Gold Coast⁶ a protectorate. But before then, in 1844 the chiefs on behalf of their peoples entered into a friendly agreement with the British, known as the Bond of 1844, which permitted formal British rule to be established over the Gold Coast. An essential element of this colonial bargain was that the land tenure of the indigenous people would continue to be governed by their customary laws, rules and practices (Akufo-Addo, 2002).

Customary law was to coexist with the received English law for both statute and common law, including the rules of equity developed by the English courts (Akufo-Addo, 2002). Thus, it was the Supreme Court Ordinance of 1876, which set up the new English legal system and gave statutory backing to this 19th century bargain, by insisting that the new system apply indigenous laws and customary rules to matters involving land tenure, succession and inheritance, marriage and family, alongside the common law and the received English statutory law. The outcome was that, chiefs continued to maintain their control and ownership of the lands within the colonial structure. Actually, it was this authority of the chiefs that saved the lands of the Ghanaian peoples when the

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⁶ The name of the country before independence; named by the colonizers after her richness in the mineral gold.
British, inspired by the Congress of Berlin, towards the end of the 19th century and at the high tides of their colonial power and imperialism, attempted to introduce the *Crown Lands Bill*, 1896 to appropriate for the colonial authority over the Ghanaian lands (Akufo-Addo, 2002). That attempt was defeated by the popular mobilization led by the chiefs and the Aborigines Rights Protection Society which caused the British to withdraw the Bill. Never again has the control that Ghanaians have over their lands been challenged. The British had used similar ways to take control over lands of indigenous peoples in some parts of Southern and Eastern Africa, like in Kenya, Zimbabwe, and South Africa where settler minorities controlled the land, which has had tragic consequences even till today (Akufo-Addo, 2002). The basic land laws in Ghana are, therefore, deeply embedded in the socio-cultural systems and political institutions of its indigenous societies.

A co-founder and leader of the Aborigines’ Rights Protection Society, John Mensah Sarbah, a London-trained activist lawyer and statesman, was the first to author an influential book, *Fanti Customary Laws* in 1904. In *Fanti Customary Laws*, Mensah Sarbah set down the rules and principles of Akan natives and customary laws that govern issues dealing with interrelationships in marriage, land tenure, property, property rights and laws governing succession and inheritance which excludes widows (Mensah Sarbah, 1904).

Succession and inheritance laws stress lineage, sex, age and soundness of mind. In determining the successor to any estate in the matrilineal lineage, genealogy comes first and foremost, and then men have precedence over women. Due to the importance attached to the responsibilities of the successor –*to be in a trustee for the property-holding group* – the potential inheritor will be screened by the elders of the matrilineal descent group in connection with the successor’s personal qualities. The successor will not only be responsible for managing the property

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7 The gender asymmetrical responsibilities in marriage
but also for any unpaid debts (Schneider and Gough, 1961). In Akan terms, the successor holds the property in trust for the ancestors (**Nananom nsamanfo**), the living (**ateasefo**2) and the future generation (**nkyirimma**).

**Akan Categories of Ontological Beings: Concept of a Person**

Raul Corazzon (2009) defines ontology as the theory of objects and their ties which provides criteria for distinguishing various types of objects (concrete and abstract, existent and non-existent, real and ideal, independent and dependent) and their ties, relations, dependences and predication. Corazzon (2009) further explained that the objective world rationally divides into many tangible objects like the Sun, the moon, stars, trees, rivers and people. Also humans speak and think about thoughts, smiles, numbers, food, and many other things. There are many similarities and differences among all these things which makes hierarchical classifications possible (Corazzon, 2009).

The underpinnings of the Akan concept of being (ontology) have spiritualistic characteristics. The Akan “traditional” religious thought is basically theocentric and theistic in nature with the Supreme Being, God, at the center of it all (Arthur & Rowe, 2001). Thus, the Akan people’s perception of, relationships with, and use of objects within the objective world emanates from this perspective. Danquah (1968) posits that,

*The true God is not of several kinds, but he can be known under several degrees or colors, for each people have a name for God, and in the name is to be found that quality or color in God which most appeals to their racial mind. To discover the meaning of this name or quality is to discover the doctrine, the teaching and impression of [that race] concerning God. What a race takes God to be, or believes he ought to be, hangs upon the meaning of the name.* (p. 1)
The Akan perception and strong belief in the “Invisible, Powerful, Supreme Being,” who created the wonderful objective world with all its objects as well as their quest to have a relationship with that supreme being, turned to use most of these same objects as medium for their purpose. For instance, from my “curiosity,” as a young girl, I wondered why my maternal grandma was not going to church with us (my mother and siblings) but chose to go to pay tributes to “teakosuua,” an idol at Akuma, a small town in the Nkoranza district in Ghana. She told us about her belief in the Supreme Being, who she could speak to as well as hear Him speak through his “linguist” – the “priestess” of teakosuua. She told us stories about how very big trees, rivers, and mountains had aided man in achieving a relationship with the Supreme Being. This practice led to the many gods (abosom, pl.; ɔbosom or bosom, sing.), which she viewed as the Supreme Being’s children or spokesmen and women.

Much of what is known by the Akan people themselves has been preserved through oral tradition, handed down from ancient times by the elders through abakɔsem, tetensem; history or ancient sayings, or mpanyinsem, sayings of the elders (Ephirim-Donkor, 1997). In addition to these oral histories, written accounts, first produced by group of European anthropologists (e.g. R.S. Rattray, Diedrich Westmann & Pieter deMarees) and indigenous Akan and other African anthropologists and philosophers (e.g. J.B. Danquah, Kwame Gyekye & Anthony Ephirim-Donkor). Among some of these earlier European travelers and missionaries, the ongoing discourse was about their denial that religion had any role in African culture. The perception at that time was, “Africans lacked those religious and moral beliefs and attitudes that define a genuine human civilization, therefore they were pagans, and did not have a religion (Oladipo, 2004).

According to Oladipo, this perception of Africans’ lack of religion was characterized by Samuel Baker (1866) as follows:
Without exception, they are without a belief in a Supreme Being, neither have they any form of worship or idolatry; nor is the darkness of their minds enlightened even by a ray of superstition. The mind is as stagnant as the morass which forms its puny world.

(as quoted in Oladipo, 2004, p.355)

This type of ignorance, misconceptions and probably misunderstandings of the Akan ontology led to the surge in the study of African religion, African Philosophy, as well as the role of religion within other individual African cultures (Oladipo, 2004).

The ingenious Akan use the objects around them to create cultural symbols to portray their beliefs about God, their attitudes towards God and His creation, and their relation to Him and His Creation (Arthur & Rowe, 2001). Through this medium, Akans have developed many names and appellations to express how they perceive God, their belief in Him and the meanings behind the various names they give to the Supreme Being. Some of the names and appellations are:

“Onyankopɔn or Nyankopɔn” (the Omnipotent); “Onyame or Nyame” (God, Our satisfaction); “Otowieduampɔn” (Fortress, Stronghold, Anchor); ɔdomankoma (Infinite, Inventor); ḳbadeε (Creator); Ananse Kokuroko (The Great Spider; The Great Designer); “Awurade” (Lord); “Ohene” (King); “Okokuroko” (The Almighty); and “Agya Nyame” (Our Father God). All these names given to the Supreme Being are in the singular form with the prefix “O or ɔ” to stress God’s comparison to other lesser gods and that there is only one Supreme God.

In the same vein, samples of the cultural art and symbols the Akan use to express their thoughts, perception and belief in God include: Gye Nyame (Except God); Hyeahyeh (Unburnable, Imperishable) and Kerapa (Sanctity). The Gye Nyame symbol symbolizes the Omnipotence and the Omnipresence of God, actually summing up the message in the strong belief, dependency and reliance on the one and only true God that, besides God, there is none. This symbol became the
national symbol of Ghana, expressing the strong belief in God by Ghanaians as a whole. This actually is an expression in Akan adage as: “Abɔde santen yi firi tete; obi nte ase a onim n’ahyease, na obi rentena ase nkosi a’awie, Gye Nyame”, which literally translates as, “this great panorama of creation dates back to time immemorial; no one lives who saw its beginning and no one will live to see its end, Except God” (Arthur & Rowe, 2001). The symbol Hyeanhye is also known as Nyame nwu na m’awu (if God dies, I will die). This symbolic expression of the permanency of God is a reflection of the Akan notion of God as a Spirit that never dies and their belief in the human soul, an image of God that will also never die. Thus, there is life after death. Kerapa, is a symbolic reflection on the sanctity of the self, spiritual strength, good spirit and good luck, because God abhors evil and sanctity is God. These cultural symbols are used in many aspects of the Akan culture such as architecture, textiles, pottery, wood calving, metal casting, art and furniture. (Appendix C shows some cultural symbols).

Philosophically, the Akan conceptualize the human being as constituting three elements: ḋkra (soul), sunsum (spirit) and honam or nipadua (body) (Danquah, 1968). The ḋkra is believed to be that which constitutes the innermost self, the essence, of the individual (Gyekye, 1995). It is the presence of (invisible) life in the individual and is said to be the embodiment and source of the individual’s destiny (nkrabea). It is explained as a radiance of Nyankopɔn in man and thus, is the divine presence in human beings. It was there before anybody was born and will continue to live after death. In her study among the African-American Christians in Salt Lake City, Dr. Haight did a wonderful explanation of this ḋkra (although she did not call it ḋkra) as; 

...Central to the West African spiritual belief system was the concept of the essential being, ‘the little me’ within the ‘big me.’ This ‘little me’ was regarded as the true self that had existed before life and would continue after death” [And also what she quotes from Sobel,
Conceptualizing the kra as the life within the person makes a strong connection with another concept, honhom (breath) which is the noun of breathe (home). When a person dies, the Akan use the expression, ne honhom kɔ (his/her breath is gone) or ne kra afiri ne mu (his/her soul has withdrawn from the body). These two expressions are basically saying the same thing – the dead person has no breath; the dead person does not possess “life.” The belief in life after death explains why Akans have many rituals at different stages of human development and livelihood from birth to death, including some of the mortuary, funeral and widowhood rites. The Sunsum (spirit) of the person is said to constitute the personality (nipa su) and the character (nipa ban) of the person. A generous person could be referred to as having good spirit (sunsum pa). It is believed that while the sunsum can leave the body and become the actor during dreams, the kra (soul) never leaves the body until death. This also underlies the belief that the spirits of the dead are still “hovering” around, thus, the strong belief in ancestorship, where there can be good spirit (sunsum pa) and bad spirits (sunsum bɔne). The body (nipadua) basically is the physical body that dies, while kra and sunsum are spiritual

**Death in Akan Tradition: Concepts and Practice**

Whether we admit it or not, death is certain and will come when it wills. Death remains a great mystery, an undisputable fact in every culture and at every age in human existence. This uncertainty about death evokes in humanity a certain frustration and fear of the unknown as human beings helplessly watch people die, and can neither intervene nor interfere. From the moment of birth (coming from the ancestors) through naming the child, puberty, marriage and death (a journey back to the ancestors), members of the Akan lineage of Ghana pass through different rites and
rituals which bind them culturally and spiritually to other members in the lineage (Aborampah, 1999).

Even though the concepts of dying and death are inevitable natural human experiences, the Akan culture like many others view “death” as a feared enemy and a taboo topic to be discussed. Instead of having open discussions or using open language about death issues, the Akans’ euphemistic language gives a kind of flexibility and a distance from their discomfort with death. Euphemistic terms and phrases like “daee a ansre” (didn’t wake up from his/her sleep), “aye Oyame dea” (has become God’s own), “Onyame ato nsa afrε no” (God has invited him/her), “sk asamando” (has gone to the underworld), “zaka nkyene agu” (has spilled the salt), “zaka baabi” (is lost somewhere), “zka ne kra akyi” (has gone back to where the soul came from) are used to announce the death of people as well as discussing death and funeral matters. The death of a person [especially, the older adults and leaders –abusua panyin, shene (king), shemaa (queenmother)] should and must be officially announced by the head of the family/lineage (abusua panyin) before anybody can publicly talk about it or even cry aloud (wail). Meanwhile, members of the family and close relatives and friends would be informed about the death behind “closed doors.” Official announcement of death has been recorded in other cultures as well. For instance, in her study of grief patterns and processes of mourning among the Yolngu of Australia, Reid (1979) observed that until the senior men have informed themselves and prepared for the ritual announcement of the death of a person to the people and others in the settlement, death is not openly acknowledged.

The Akan conceptualize death as good or bad depending on a number of factors including age, status, cause of death, place of death, circumstances surrounding the death, and most importantly, attributes to the person’s good and generous life-style. Good death “owupa” is perceived as a peaceful, timely and natural end of an accomplished life, especially in old age. Sjaak
van der Geest, who has conducted anthropological field studies (intermittently) on the people of Kwahu (Akan sub-group) in Ghana since 1971, succinctly explains good death as the Akan perceive it:

_Peaceful death as a ‘good death’ refers to the dying of a person having finished all business and made peace with others before his/her death...dying not by violence, an accident or a fearsome disease, not by foul means and without pain. Peaceful death comes naturally...takes place at home (epitome of peacefulness), surrounded by children and grandchildren and finally a death acceptable by the relatives._ (van der Geest, 2002, p.899)

The Akan concept of a good death has a strong basis in their belief in life after death and reincarnation. It is those who return to the ancestral world through this peaceful, “good death” who become good ancestors (nananom nsaman pa). They continue to communicate spiritually with the living (grant good wishes and health), ensure the continuity of the lineage, form the spiritual foundation of the lineage and eventually some come back to be reborn. Belief in reincarnation is a central theme of many Eastern religions, like India, China and Japan (Rooke,1980). Reincarnation is also a very important ideology of traditional religions of many cultures in Africa including the Akamba (Kenya), Akan (Ghana), Luo (Zambia), Yoruba (Nigeria) and Shona (Zimbabwe) (Rooke, 1980). The belief in rebirth and instances where some people are believed to be reborn is also strong among many cultures including the Akans (van der Geest, 2002). Through reincarnation, the ancestors renew the world of the living as they reproduce the group (Crentsil, 2007). Ancestors as the extension of the lineage is fittingly captured by Meyer Fortes (1965): "Ancestors symbolize the continuity of the social structure and social relations created by kinship and descent" (p. 137). To the Akan, there is a continuum of the living (ateasefoɔ), the ancestors (nananom nsamanfoɔ) and the yet-to-be-born (nkyimma) that form the Akan family (abusua).
Bad death (owubɔne), on the other hand, could be one which is premature or caused by certain fearsome diseases like tuberculoses, HIV/AIDS and leprosy. The ‘worst’ bad death (aɔfowuo) occurs through accident (by car, fallen tree, collapsed building, etc), suicide, childbirth, abortion, murder, etc. Souls of people who die under such circumstances are believed to be wandering around because they did not die peacefully. Nonetheless, the death of youth, referred to as “abugyen” (forced to break suddenly), causes a lot of confusion, anger, pain and stress because of the belief that it is untimely for any young person to die. Such deaths create scenes of pandemonium and vehement crying, wailing, shouting, tooting horns, etc as Sjaak van der Geest observed at a funeral of a 28 year old man at Kwahu-Tafo in Ghana (van der Geest, 2004, p. 905). As Stroebe, Stroebe and Hansson (1993) put it, “…under such circumstances, grief over the death of a loved one is compounded by related tragedy…” (p. 3).

Societies and cultures across the world react to the death of their members with significant rites and rituals, and dignity depending on the circumstances surrounding the death, as well as the personality involved (Agbasiere, 2000). Among the repertoire of Akan rituals and rites, the mortuary, burial and funeral rites, which go through processes of grieving and mourning, are the most elaborate public celebration. Grief, the spontaneous emotional response to the loss of a loved one, “is shaped by the social context in which it occurs” (Rosenblatt, 1993, p.102). Therefore, the definition of the appropriate expression and intensity of grief experienced by groups or individuals is shaped by societal and cultural values and belief systems. The elaboration of the Akan mortuary, burial and funeral ceremonies defines the way they send off their deceased members (peacefully and happily) to the land of the dead; that is, give the deceased person a fitting burial as this is the last rite-of-passage. It is also a way of assuring the immediate bereaved members of the unflinching support of the whole matrilineage throughout the grieving process (Rosenblatt, 1993).
Socio-Cultural & Economic Context of Akan Widows

In the context of African development, access to land and other resources are key to basic livelihood and therefore a question of fundamental human rights (Duncan and Brants, 2004). Since agriculture dominates most African economies, land is a basic tool for development and a significant determinant of income earning power. Empirical evidence on the gender-growth nexus across countries suggests a significant potential for higher economic growth if existing barriers to investment and economic participation by women could be addressed (Agboli, 2007). Empirical analysis from a survey of 450 women across Ghana on gender and economic growth indicated that the gender impact of most of the business environmental factors under investigation was for the most part neutral. Thirty-two percent of the participants did not feel that being a woman made a difference in conducting their businesses. Although 21 percent of the respondents felt they had a more positive experience from being a businesswoman, 22 percent had negative feelings from being businesswomen. However, the report continued that 57 percent of the respondents thought it was more challenging as a woman business owner to balance business and family commitments and an additional, 33 percent felt disadvantaged as a woman with regard to accessing formal credit and dealing with bureaucracy and corruption (Agboli, 2007).

Hampel-Milagrosa (2009), a Consultant for the Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA) led a team to conduct open-ended interviews with 21 Ghanaian women entrepreneurs on Gender Issues in Doing Business and reiterates that, “traditions are important determinants of women’s economic participation and productivity in Ghana” (p.6). Discriminatory traditional inheritance practices negatively impacts women abilities to own formal property that they could use to obtain commercial credit (Hampel-Milagrosa, 2009). Discriminatory property rights laws, and androcentric traditional, cultural and social customs exclude them from direct property inheritance,
except through men, especially their husbands. When their husbands die, these widows, especially those in the rural areas, frequently lose their rights to property and sometimes their own possessions. This “lack of landed property” as discussed by all 50 participants in the pilot study, is one main factor contributing to widows’ impoverished living conditions (Korang-Okrah, 2007/08). Other research findings add that widows’ lack of landed property (including housing) affects their access to other resources, like capital, health and education (Agarwal, 1994a; Pandey, 2003; Tinker & Summerfield, 1999).

Additional findings from Hampel-Milagrosa’s (2009), study show that women could not realize their full potential in productivity because both women entrepreneurs and employees also are traditionally expected to perform the bulk of domestic tasks. They additionally found that other factors such as low or no education, dropping out of school to earn income at an early age to support the family income, few available positions in the formal job market, lack of financial capital and the need to balance work and family life combine to negatively impact the ever-growing share of women in the Ghanaian informal economy (Hampel-Milagrosa, 2009).

Other research studies connect women’s low activity within the socio-economic environment of Ghana to factors such as, high levels of illiteracy (Agboli, 2007; Duncan and Brants, 2004) and early marriage coupled with lack of employable skills (Kuenyehia and Ofei-Aboagye, 1998; Agboli, 2007). Indeed, as many as 32 out of 50 participants from my focus group interviews (for the pilot study) were found to be illiterates (had never been to school) and many also married around 20 years of age with no employment skills to work outside the home to support themselves and children after their husbands’ death (Korang-Okrah, 2007/08).
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative, phenomenological research design to understand and describe the lived experiences and the essence of widowhood for twenty Akan widows in Ghana. The study was designed to focus on the widows’ descriptions and constructions of their experiences, challenges and survival strategies in relation to the loss of their property rights, which is a significant gap in the literature. Participants were purposely selected through the maximum variation sampling method to provide a unique variation in the information collected. Data was collected, using a semi-structured interview guide, from two regions, Ashanti and Brong-Ahafo, in Ghana. Four sites were chosen, Kumasi and Kotei from the Ashanti Region and Sunyani and Nsuaetre from Brong-Ahafo Region.

The phenomenological design requires the researcher to transcend or suspend past knowledge or experience in order to understand the participant’s description of the phenomenon at a deeper level (Moustakas, 1994). This was an attempt to seek the core of a lived experience and the essence of widowhood with a sense of “freshness” in order to elicit rich, descriptive contextual data from the participants. Philosophically, there is no single reality of an object because the reality of any object is inextricably related to one’s consciousness of it (Stewart and Mickunas, 1990). Thus, the “reality of an object,” according to Creswell (2007), “is only perceived within the meaning of the experience of an individual” (p. 59). Moustakas (1994) coined “intersubjectivity” as one of the remarkable features of the phenomenological approach and explains it as, “subject and object are integrated, what I see is interwoven with how I see it, with whom I see it, and with whom I am…” (p.59).
Application of a phenomenological, research design, according to Schwandt (2001), “aims to identify and describe the subjective experiences of respondents” (p.192). The purpose of phenomenology is to explore or study the phenomenon of human experience in various acts of consciousness, particularly cognitive and perceptual acts and at different contexts. The phenomenological researcher therefore pursues the meaning of the phenomenon under study, as constructed and described by the participants who have experienced the phenomenon, particularly focusing on the subjective aspect of their experience (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998, p. 23).

In the case of this study, the only condition for someone to experience “widowhood” is to become widowed. Therefore, a phenomenological design was adopted to identify 20 Akan widows from two regions (Ashanti and Brong-Ahafo regions in Ghana) to describe their subjective, lived experiences, the social and psychological characteristics of widowhood and the real meanings they hold. One of the principles of phenomenological design requires bracketing personal experiences or setting aside presuppositions of the phenomenon (in this case, ‘widowhood’ plus its subsequent violations of widows’ property rights) to allow an open, unbiased receptive presence to the participants’ descriptions and essence of their lived experiences.

Phenomenology researchers study situations in the everyday world from the viewpoint of the experiencing person. This experiential view contributes greatly to the understanding and the effective working relationship between researchers and the participants. The phenomenological viewpoint is based on two premises; first, a) Experience is a valid and fruitful source of knowledge. According van den Berg (1972), any person’s knowledge is based upon what that person experiences, whether it is firsthand or secondhand experience. The second premise states that, our everyday worlds are a valuable source of knowledge. We can gain important insights into the essential nature of an event by analyzing how it occurred in our daily lives (Becker, 1992).
I chose this research design for my study in part, because of its consistency with the feminists’ philosophy of reflexivity, which means a non-hierarchical relationship between the researcher and the researched as well as rendering women’s invisible experiences visible.

**Research Questions**

The main interest and focus of this qualitative phenomenological study was to identify and describe the subjective experiences of Ghanaian (Akan) widows in relation to widowhood and violations of their property rights. The study applied a naturalistic approach involving collecting, analyzing and interpreting data for 20 Akan widows. The goal is to understand this complex phenomenon of widowhood and its subsequent issues of property rights. According to Frankel & Devers (2000), “there is agreement that good qualitative studies answer clearly stated, important research questions” (p. 251). The following central research questions guided the study:

1. What are the experiences of urban and rural Akan widows in relation to problems of property rights violation? (What is it like to be an Akan widow? To be an Akan widow in an urban or rural area without rights to property?)

2. What are their experiences of challenges in daily living as well as strategies for overcoming adversities? (e.g., What is the role of religion, knowledge of the PNDCL111 in navigating and negotiating for resources)

3. Are there any relative differences between Akan widows’ levels of education and their perceived barriers that prevent them from accessing economic, legal and other resources?

**Sites**

This study took place in two regions of Ghana, namely, the Ashanti and Brong-Ahafo Regions. Research sites were the two regional capitals Kumasi and Sunyani, and two towns, Kotei (Ashanti) and Nsatre (Brong-Ahafo). These two regions were chosen because they are predominantly Matrilineal Akan regions, their known cultural observerance of traditional widows’
rites as well as the common knowledge that widows’ rights to property are violated in these regions. The cities and towns /villages within the two regions were chosen because their characteristics were similar to those of the larger regions in which they were embedded. Also I had established some contacts with some people in these areas from my pilot study.

**Ashanti Region (ASH)**

Ashanti Region is one of the ten regions in Ghana. It covers about 10% (24,390 sq. km) of Ghana’s land size and shares its northern boundary with the Brong-Ahafo Region. Ashanti Region is the most heavily populated region in Ghana with a population of about 4.5 million out of Ghana’s population of 23.8 million (Ghana Health Service, 2010). Forty seven percent of this population lives in rural areas, which is lower than the national figure of 65% (GLSS 5, 2008). Males constitute about 50.02% of this population. The region is blessed with rich soil and an adequate amount of rainfall that promotes agriculture and related economic activities. Ethnically, the region is quite homogeneous with Akans being the predominant group, forming about 77.9% of the region’s native population (87.3%).

In terms of culture, the Ashanti Region is often referred to as “the seat of Ghana’s culture” due to its large repertoire of traditional and cultural practices such as the rites-of-passage of marriage and widowhood rites as well as cultural activities in pottery, music (drumming & dancing), artifacts, food, clothing, beading, etc (Ghana Health Service, 2010).

**Kumasi**, one of the study sites is the regional and the Metropolitan capital. The population of Kumasi is about 1.4 million (32.4% of the regional total). It is located in the transitional forest zone and is about 270 kilometers north of Accra, the national capital. Kumasi has a number of tourism sites including the Manhyia Palace (the seat of the Asantehene –King of the Ashanti
Kingdom) and the Kumasi Zoological Gardens (for education, preservation of wildlife as well as place of leisure).

Statistics on illiteracy levels are high in the rural areas, especially for females and ranges from 26% in the Kumasi Metropolis to 64.7% in the rural areas (Modern Ghana Media Communication Ltd, 2010). The major occupations for males include agriculture/fishing and related work (40.8%), production (24.8%), sales (11.7%), clerical and related work (7.7%), and professional and related work (7.5%). Females in the Ashanti region are mostly engaged in occupational activities such as agriculture and related work (43.9%), sales (24.3%), production/transport/equipment (14.6%), and service (8.5%).

Kotei, the second site in the Ashanti region is a small village located in the Ejisu-Jaben district. Ejisu-Juaben Municipal area is one of the 26 administrative and political districts in the Ashanti Region. The Municipality stretches over an area of 637.2 km2 constituting about 10% of the entire Ashanti Region, Ejisu is its capital. The Municipality is known globally for its rich cultural heritage and tourists attractions, notably the booming kente weaving industry at Bonwire. The village Kotei, could be rated as a peri-urban community (Benneh, Kasanga & Amoyaw, 1996) because of its proximity to Kumasi, the regional capital. It is situated about 10 kilometers from the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science & Technology in Kumasi and provides residence for some faculty, staff and students of the university. Although the people are experiencing some degrees of urbanization, their economic activities, perception, priorities and standards could still be rated as a village (Benneh, Kasanga & Amoyaw, 1996).

Brong-Ahafo Region (B/A)

The Brong-Ahafo Region, formerly a part of the Ashanti Region, was created in April 1959. The region covers an area of 39,557 sq. km (about 17%), and is the second largest region in Ghana.
It has a population of about 2.1 million of which 62.6% live in the rural area (Ghana Health Service, 2010). The predominant ethnic group is the Akan with 62.7% of the region’s population. The sex distribution of the population is almost equal between females and males. More than half (57.6%) of the population aged 15 years and older in the region are in marital unions. Females in married and those not officially married in the region are more than their male counterparts.

The percentage of the population who have never been to school is 42.4% (37.2% males and 47.7% females) (Ghana Health Service, 2010). Christians (70.8%) outnumber all other religious groups in the region. Like the Ashanti region and even generally in Ghana, economic activities in B/A is predominantly agrarian with approximately 48% of the population engaged in agricultural production and related work. Like the Ashanti region, B/A region lies in the forest zone and is a major cocoa and timber producing area. In addition, these two regions “hoard” Ghana’s gold sites which also offer employment to many in these regions.

**Sunyani**, the third study site is the regional capital as well as the Municipal capital of the Sunyani Municipal area. It has a population of about 80,245. Sunyani has more diverse economic activities than other areas in the region. Twenty-four percent of the population in Sunyani is employed in the service sector and 15% in commerce and industry. Sunyani shares most of the characteristics in the region, except that being the regional capital, it is one of the few urban communities in the region, with first class road networks to different parts of Ghana.

**Nsuatre**, the fourth study site is in the Sunyani West District of the Brong-Ahafo Region. The distance from Nsuatre to Sunyani is about 20 kilometers. The town is basically rural and can also be termed as a peri-urban area. Many workers reside there and drive to work in Sunyani. And like the situation of the people in Kotei, Nsuatre people are also experiencing some varying degrees of urbanization, but still could be rated as a village.
Gaining Access and Locating Participants

This study’s participants were 20 Akan widows aged between 26 and 85, selected from the four research sites in Ghana. Five widows were selected from each site. These widows were carefully chosen individuals who have experienced widowhood in the Akan culture within the last ten years. Most of them have also lost their property rights as a result of their husbands’ death. Creswell (2007) points out that, “… participants in the study need to be carefully chosen to be individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon in question, so that the researcher can forge a common understanding in the end” (p.62). Eligibility criteria for participants for this study included those who have been widowed within the last ten years and have not been remarried, those 20 years and above and those whose marriages are within the Akan tradition. Since I carried out my prior studies at these various sites, I had already established contacts with some women is group leaders in these cities and towns. According to Hycner (1985), it is

*often necessary for a phenomenological researcher utilizing the interview method to seek out participants who not only have had the particular experience being investigated but also are able to articulate their experience…The critical issue here is that the phenomenon dictates the method (not vice-versa) including even the selection and type of participants.* (p. 294).

Creswell & Plano Clark (2007) agree with Hycner that in qualitative research, the inquirer purposefully selects individuals and sites that can provide the necessary information. On that note, I employed maximum variation sampling, in which according to Creswell & Plano Clark (2007), “individuals are chosen who hold different perspectives on the central phenomenon” (p. 112). The choice of this purposive sampling procedure was the right fit for my study in the sense that, although widowhood is a universal phenomenon, there is a huge variation in individual experiences. This sampling procedure is used to maximize variations based on diversity of issues such as, socio-
demographic background, including rural/urban residence, age, social class, gender, culture and tradition, socio-economic, political environment, level of education, religious affiliation as well as personal attributes. Maximum variation sampling is used to document the unique variations of how people have emerged in adapting to different conditions (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). According to Creswell & Plano Clark (2007), “The central idea of using maximum variation sampling is that, if participants are purposefully chosen to be different, then their views will reflect this difference and provide a good qualitative study” (p.112). I deliberately used this sampling technique for two reasons: for high quality case descriptions used for documenting uniqueness and identification of the significant shared patterns of commonalities across participants (Patton, 1990).

Since I had already established contacts with some women’s group leader, I used them as gatekeepers for the research sites. Before I set out for my study, I sent them copies of the referral script which included the type of people eligible to be participants, topic of the study, why I was conducting such a study, as well as my affiliated institution. After the initial selection of widows, I used snowball sampling in which participants were asked to make use of their social networks to refer other widows who could potentially participate in the study.

**Ethical Issues**

According to Hammersley and Atkinson (1983), the way researchers and participants come together is viewed as part of the data gathering process because the process of gaining access to participants can influence the data that is collected. Therefore, gaining access to the research site and to the participants’ trust require consideration of some ethical issues. After fulfilling the requirements for the University of Illinois’s institutional review board’s approval, my obligation was to practice exactly what I said in the application. I promised to respect the participants as
human beings, not to harm them through the methods I used, and that the findings will benefit them. I made use of an informed consent before starting every individual interview.

I read and explained (since many of them were illiterates) the content of the informed consent. Content of the informed consent for this study included: purpose of the study, why they have been selected as participants of the study, procedures of the study, risks and benefits of taking part in the study, voluntary nature of participants, their rights (stop at any time) and confidentiality procedures. Each participant had the right to sign (or thumb-print for illiterates) if she agreed to be a participant. Additional ethical issues centered on asking their permission to audio and video tape interview proceedings. Then I provided contact information about where or whom to contact in case they needed that as well as my contact information if they wanted to contact me directly.

**Selection and Description of Participants**

Twenty Akan widows were selected for this study which sought to describe their subjective experiences and the meanings they hold about their widowhood experiences. Ages of the widows interviewed range from 30 to 81 years with mood of them falling within the 46-55 years range. Three-quarters of the widows (15) were over 50 years of age. The age distribution is displayed in Table 1, below.
Table 1: Age Distribution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age in Years</th>
<th>Number of Widows</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30 - 35</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36 - 45</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46 - 55</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56 - 65</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66 - 75</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>76 – 81</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>20</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2, below, shows the educational status of the participants. had never been to school.

Five participants out of the six who have had post secondary education were teachers. The two who are university graduates are also educators, working in higher institutions.

Table 2: Educational Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Middle School/Junior/High Sec. School</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-Secondary (Teacher Training/High National Diploma)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University Education</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Formal Education</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>20</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 shows the distribution of participants’ educational status in relation to the place the person lived, either rural or urban. Five out of the six with post secondary education live in the urban area. Most participants from the rural areas never went to school.
Table 3: Educational and Residential Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Urban %</th>
<th>Rural %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Middle School/Junior/High Sec. School</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-Sec (Teacher Trg/High National Dip)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University Education</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Formal Education</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>10</strong></td>
<td><strong>10</strong></td>
<td><strong>50</strong></td>
<td><strong>50</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 shows marital distribution according to the type of marriage each widow engaged in before becoming widowed. All marriages, whether Mohammedan or Christian must complete the customary rites performance before any blessing or registration of the marriage. Therefore the customary marriage in discussion here refers to those that are not blessed (Christian or Mohammedan Wedding). Seven out of the twenty widows were living in polygamous marriages.

Table 4: Type of Marriage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marriage</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monogamy</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polygamy</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customary</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blessed/Mohammedan</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>20</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5 below shows the educational status of participants in relation to the type of marriage they lived in before their husbands died. The distribution shows that 11 out of the 14 widows who were involved in monogamous marriage have had some level of formal education. Whereas the two
Table 5: Educational Status and Type of Marriage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Monogamy</th>
<th>Polygamy</th>
<th>Customary</th>
<th>Blessed/Mohammedan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/Junior HS</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post Secondary</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/Training College</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University Education</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Formal Education</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>14</strong></td>
<td><strong>6</strong></td>
<td><strong>10</strong></td>
<td><strong>10</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Widows who are university graduates had blessed their marriages, another two out of the seven who lived in polygamous marriage were post-secondary graduates.

Table 6: Residential and Occupation Status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Accountant</th>
<th>Educ/Teaching</th>
<th>Bakery</th>
<th>Petty Trading</th>
<th>Seamstress</th>
<th>Farming</th>
<th>No Job</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1</strong></td>
<td><strong>6</strong></td>
<td><strong>2</strong></td>
<td><strong>5</strong></td>
<td><strong>1</strong></td>
<td><strong>3</strong></td>
<td><strong>2</strong></td>
<td><strong>20</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To gain more understanding of the widows’ occupational status, I developed table 6 for the distribution of their occupation in relation to where they stay, rural or urban. Six widows are teachers while five are engaged in petty trading. There were only two of them from the rural area who reported they were unemployed. In relation to their income level, most of them could not figure out how much they earn. They attributed this to the type of work/job they are engaged in.
Table 7 shows the distribution of participants’ religious affiliation. Almost all the women leaders I worked with at the sites are all Catholics but the discussions about the participant illegibility characteristics resulted in some religious variation. Although 17 of the 20 widows professed to be Christians, they do not belong to the same religious denomination.

Table 7: Religious Affiliation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CHRISTIANITY</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assemblies of God</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic/Roman</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jehovah Witness</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodist</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pentecost</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDA</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOSLEM</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Collection

The purpose of this study was to understand Akan widows’ descriptions of their experiences of widowhood, violations of their rights to property and the meanings they attach to those experiences. To uncover such subjective experiences an in-depth semi-structured interview method was used. This is because of its exploratory nature that allows participants to provide detailed descriptions of the subject matter and to reconstruct and integrate the meaning of their experiences (Patton, 1990; Smith & Osborn, 2003). Phenomenological approaches are good at surfacing deep
issues, particularly exposing the taken-for-granted assumptions, challenges a comfortable status quo and making voices heard. The strength of a semi-structured interview, according to Tomura (2009), is its natural spontaneity in allowing the interviewee to explore his/her experiences in depth within a flexible framework. However, Tomura sounds a word of caution against relying too heavily on the flexibility, especially being tempted to pursue irrelevant but interesting topics raised by the interviewee.

**Interview**

Data was collected face-to-face using the open-ended interview protocol, which guided the interview process, in each participant’s home or at a location of her choice that is convenient for her. All interviews were audio-taped and lasted between 45 to 60 minutes. Most of the interviews were videotaped as well. The semi-structured interview protocol was developed to explore the lived experiences, perspectives and the meanings participants attached to their experiences. The semi-structured open-ended interview guide was used to collect data from participants about their lived experiences through widowhood and rights to property issues; their perception as regards widowhood; Akan cultural values, beliefs and practices in connection to marriage, widowhood rites and succession; the meaning they make out of what they are going through as widows; what factors aided in their positive adaptation and their description of their lived experiences as wives.

Since “doing phenomenology means capturing rich descriptions of phenomena and their settings,” (Kensit, 2000, p 104 cited in Groenewold, 2004), the process of gathering data took the conversational interview form. Conversational interviewing was designed to assure that all respondents understood the questions as intended. Through collaboration and communication we talked about the questions, understood each other which enabled the participants to give descriptions and meanings of widowhood and property rights, the phenomena I studied (Conrad &
Schober, 1999). Conrad & Schober (1999) found that conversational interviewing improves response accuracy even though it requires additional time to clarify concepts. Interviews were conducted in the respondents’ native language, Akan (Twi), which happens to be my mother tongue too. The time-consuming nature of such data collection strategy lends itself for support which I got from my contact persons who provided accommodation, food and drove me round. All of them are indigenous, educated and women groups’ leaders. A relatively structured section of the protocol was used to collect data on participants’ demographical characteristics and on the factors that have aided in their positive adaptation. (See Appendix A for Interview Protocol).

**Participant Observation**

Participant observation, according to Patton (1990), provides a “window” for the researcher to better understand the context in which the participants live and share activities and their lives. Through participant observation the researcher is able to directly observe non-verbal actions and infer meanings not in the awareness of the participants. Widowhood experience is something most widows, especially those from developing countries like Ghana, do not easily talk about because of its emotional-laden characteristics. Therefore being able to observe participants within their residential areas as well as during the time they were sharing their lived experiences increased my understanding and interpretation of the contexts under which they live.

I did observed participants from different situations to really get the understanding of what they were going through even as they shared their stories of bereavement as well as how they have been able to move on in life. About 50% of them (10) became so emotional during the time they were talking about the very moments they heard about their husbands’ death. Three of them cried aloud uncontrollably during the interview. One incident surprised me, when I was interviewing a widow whose husband had died only 10 days and was still in the morgue. She spoke eloquently
without any emotional signs. So I was surprised when I asked how long she had been widowed and she said, 10 days. I also got the opportunity to interview eight widows in their own home. I got the opportunity to observe how they interacted with their kids and other people living in their homes. Observing their non-verbal ‘emotional’ actions while talking, provided a window for me to understand the widows’ feelings as they narrate and describe their experiences.

Data Analysis and Interpretation Strategies

The purpose of applying the qualitative phenomenological design for this study was to capture respondents’ descriptions and meanings of their lived experiences in relation to widowhood and property rights. Data collected were inductively transcribed verbatim in Akan (Twi), taking careful notes of the nonverbal and para-linguistic communications (Hycner, 1985). For the data analysis of the transcripts, I applied the interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) method (Smith, Flowers & Osborn, 2010). The essence of IPA according to Smith, Flowers & Osborn (2010), lies in its analytic focus which directs attention towards participants’ attempts to make sense of their experiences. Thus, IPA is characterized by a set of common processes (such as, moving from the descriptive to the interpretive) and principles (such as psychologically focusing on individual personal meaning-making in particular context) (Smith, Flowers & Osborn, 2010). Although Smith, Flowers & Osborn (2010) posit that, “There is no clear right or wrong way of conducting this sort of analysis, and we encourage IPA researchers to be innovative in the ways that they approach it” (p. 80), they have suggested some fundamental steps for IPA.

These steps involved reading and re-reading the transcripts, examining semantic content and language used on a very exploratory level in order to develop familiarity with the data. Others include developing emerging themes, searching for connections across those emerging themes which will lead to developing super-ordinate themes and proceeding to interpretation (Smith,
Flowers & Osborn, 2010). I read through the transcripts several times while listening to either the video or audio taped recorded interview. This inductive approach focused on identifying patterns in the data by means of thematic codes. “Inductive analysis means that the patterns, themes and categories of analysis come from the data; they emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis” (Patton, 1980, p.306).

To be able to focus on and understand the participants’ experiences from their own point of view, I employed the processes of epoche. This is a process to try to set aside all my prejudgments or bracket my presuppositions about the phenomena under study, as the inquirer, in order to best understand the descriptions of the widowhood and property issues from those who have experienced them. Emic codes focusing on the meanings ascribed by the participants to their experiences was developed through repeated readings of the interviews transcripts (Schwandt, 2001). All interviews were read several times independently by two more Akan friends who helped with the verbatim transcribing into the Twi language as well as translation from Twi to English. Were frequently compared notes which helped a lot. Through discussions with these two peer debriefers and their constructive critiques, generated a list of descriptive codes characterizing participants’ responses. In addition to this process, peer debriefing continued till all data were analyzed. Member checking continued throughout my data analysis phase to make sure the descriptive codes characterized the meanings participants intended to convey through their responses (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Enhancing Trustworthiness**

Reliability and validity, the traditional criteria used in quantitative studies, have been conceptualized as trustworthiness, rigor and quality in qualitative paradigm (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Seale, 1999; Stenbacka, 2001). For example, Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that sustaining the trustworthiness of a research report depends on the issues, quantitatively discussed as validity
and reliability. In searching for the meaning of rigor in research, Davies and Dodd (2002) find that the term rigor in research appears in reference to the discussion about reliability and validity. Therefore, Golafshani (2003) posit that, “if the issues of reliability, validity, trustworthiness, quality and rigor are meant to differentiate a 'good' from 'bad' research, then testing and increasing the reliability, validity, trustworthiness, quality and rigor will be important to the research in any paradigm” (p. 602).

The ability of qualitative data to more fully describe a phenomenon is an important consideration not only from the researcher's perspective, but from the reader's perspective as well. Therefore, as Lincoln and Guba (1985) posit, “if you want people to understand better than they otherwise might, provide them information in the form in which they usually experience it” (p. 120). Lincoln and Guba (1985) prescribed four main criteria for assessing the trustworthiness of qualitative studies in the social sciences as Credibility, Transferability, Dependability and Confirmability.

This qualitative phenomenological study was planned to enhance its trustworthiness. Employing the maximum variation sampling method was to get the unique people who have experienced widowhood to describe their lived experiences and perceptions of the phenomena. Their contextual Facts about the existence of the phenomena (widowhood and property rights for this study) were collected through their stories which yielded rich contextual data. According to Moustakas (1994), establishing the truth about things begins with the researcher’s perception. Therefore one must reflect first on the meaning of the experience for oneself, then turn outward to those being interviewed and establish “intersubjective validity.” This is a process of testing out the understanding with other persons through a back-and-forth social interaction as well as establishing verification using information feedback.
I had the advantage of the knowledge of language and culture because I am a native. That really helped my building of rapport which happened naturally. I had the opportunity of working with women (like them) for four years when I was a development coordinator and so I am very well experienced in how to relate and communicate with vulnerable women. Using the collaborative, communicative interview tool, where the inquirer and respondent can go “back and forth” until the respondent understands what has been asked and gives the “right” response, was a form of member checking to produce some “valid” data about the phenomena. Although the field study has ended, I continued to get in-touch with the participants through visits and phone calls to confirm some aspects of their stories as well as for clarifications.

I hope to stay in contact with them for future studies on the phenomena since this study seems to be the first or among the few empirical studies of this kind. I used the peer debriefing technique to enhance the credibility, the truth value of this study (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). I contacted two friends who are Teachers and are very well versed in the Akan culture as well as have knowledge about doing qualitative study. They all listened to the audio-recorded tapes, did some of the transcriptions and we discussed and compared notes. That really helped with great understanding of some expressions of participants in the native language. This helped in the checking on the credibility of the data. In addition, I have the advantage of the language and the understanding of the culture which enriched my rapport building and the interview process.

In chapters four and five, I present the findings from the field as experienced, perceived and described by the participants. Most of the data presented are direct quotations from the widows in relation to their experiences of daily challenges, as well as the successful strategies they employ to survive.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS: RISK FACTORS (CHALLENGES) CONFRONTING WIDOWS

The death of a husband begins the widow’s “chain” of challenges. Death remains a great mystery, an undisputable fact in every culture and at every age in human existence. This uncertainty about death evokes in humanity a certain frustration and fear of the unknown as human beings helplessly watch people die, and can neither intervene nor interfere. From the moment of birth (coming from the ancestors) through naming the child, puberty, marriage and death (a journey back to the ancestors), members of the Akan lineage of Ghana pass through a series of rites and rituals. Death, the last phase of living within the Akan culture, is characterized by a series of rites including the morgue, funeral and widowhood rites. Widowhood is commonly viewed as a life transition, the last phase, and a dreaded time of life for most women. It happens over a relatively short period of time, but has lasting effects on a woman’s life.

Widowhood Poses Many Challenges

In this chapter, I discuss findings from 20 Akan widows’ descriptions of their widowhood experiences. These widows described their “nightmares” in relation to their husbands’ death, the consequences that followed their bereavements and their experiences throughout the period of widowhood. They described who a widow is, and the various challenges they had encountered as widows including: widowhood rites, upsetting treatment from their in-laws, losing their farm lands and housing, living in poverty, raising children alone, loneliness and battling health issues as well as challenges the legal systems which has failed to protect widows in Ghana.

Definition of a Widow

In describing their transition from ‘a married woman to a widow,’ all 20 respondents described who a widow is in Akan terms, referring to the widowhood period and widowhood rites
All 20 widows described a widow by saying:

“A widow or widower (Okunafo –generic term for both women and men) is someone whose husband or wife is dead.”

However, 4 out of the 10 widows from the rural areas defined a widow in a typical Akan cultural terms. Two widows, Jane and Connie, from the Brong-Ahafo Region gave description of who in the Akan culture is a widow by saying:

“A widow is one whose marriage rites were complete, then loses the husband through death and has not remarried. You are alone and have to do everything by yourself. Whereas at one point you had someone to share your problems with, now you are alone. If you haven’t remarried and have children, you are a single parent as well.”

Connie also defined a widow this way:

“A widow is someone whose husband has died and has neither remarried nor engaging in any sexual relationship. In our Akan tradition, if your husband dies, immediately it will be said that you, the widow, have sat in the dew. Then at every 6 PM during the first 40 days, you will be ushered into a room.”

The widow is ushered into a room at 6:00 PM or advised not to be outside after that time to avoid the dew falling on her. Knowing that the widow is not in a good state of health (because of grief, crying, sorrow, etc.), she should avoid the dew to avoid catching cold. Bertha from rural AS defined widowhood as:

“To describe widowhood, to my understanding, is when your husband dies, you are not remarried and you have nobody to talk to or discuss issues with. It is not all issues that you can discuss with even your children. For example, when you are in trouble or have been met with a challenge, you need someone to talk to about it. It is not everything that you can talk to a stranger or a family member about. When you are with your husband and something serious is worrying you, sometimes he can help you out without you even mentioning it. Can you tell your children that you need money or something like that? They don’t work! They are even looking up to you. That is how I personally understand who a widow is.”

Mercy from rural BA described the widowhood condition as:

“Personally I pray that no woman or person would be a widow. It is a painful, stressful and unpleasant situation for a person to bear. The way some families will treat you as if you are not a human being. Due to the way my husband’s family treated me I kept myself indoors and cried for 7 months. It is really a difficult situation and if you do not marry into a good family, you are dead.
Widowhood and Widowhood Rites

All 20 respondents described their own experiences as well as their perceptions of widowhood and widowhood rites. Ten out of the twenty respondents observed the Akan cultural rites of passage for widow or widowhood rites. Seven out of the ten women who observed the rites were Christians and the rest were Moslems. Five of the ten women followed what is expected of every widow, which means to go through the widowhood rites and stay in widowhood for at least one year. Four were from urban Brong-Ahafo (BA), five from rural BA and one from the rural of Ashanti (AS) region.

One widow, Perpetual, from urban BA described her experience of observing the widowhood rites as:

“Widowhood rites differ from town to town. My husband was from Berekum and so I went through the rites according to their custom. We were two wives. We were kept in a room for forty days. After burial, when they wanted to take us through some rituals, I refused because I am a Christian. The day of the funeral, we were kept in the room till 2 p.m. They also cut some hair from my rival as well as her fingernails for something I do not know. These were the things I refused as a Christian. They made us go around the house three times in the middle of the night when it is dark. It is presumed that if your toes hit a stone, then that meant that you were unfaithful to your husband. My rival and I had to go through this. I have learnt through my ordeal that going through the widowhood rites is painful and inhumane sometimes. For instance, we ate once a day at 2 p.m. and bathe three times a day for forty days. If you were hungry in the middle of the night, you had no option but to go hungry till it was time to eat. This is inhumane treatment to the widow.”

Angelina, a widow from rural BA who was pregnant with her seventh child when her husband died in a car accident described her experience as:

“I was in the village where we were working as caretakers of someone’s cocoa farm. Personally, on the day that my husband died, had I been informed earlier about the death, I would not have travelled home with the person who came for me. Actually, I would have gone somewhere and would never have come back home. I was pregnant with our seventh child and the eldest child was only 15 years and the last one was only two. There were all sorts of things running through my mind. Eight of us siblings lived in one room with our mother. I did not even have a place to sleep. My husband had built a house in Berekum for us to move in but now that he was dead, I had no
place to live. I always say, today’s widows have it easy. It was such that for the first 15 days, you will have to cry (wail) every morning, and for the first 40 days you will eat twice a day, bath three times a day and there would be someone always watching over you. It is believed that if you do not have caretakers, you could harm yourself when left alone. There was someone watching you even when going to the toilet because you might feel life was not worth living. There are just too many things running through your mind at that time of death that your mind may tell you what to do and you may end up acting upon some of those thoughts.”

As a Christian, Georgina, a widow from rural BA whose husband died suddenly from a motor accident had this description of her experience:

“The news about my husband’s death caused a major commotion; it was really shocking news. When they told me, to be honest and before God something happened to me, something I could not comprehend and cannot explain. It really affected my state of mind; it affected me to the extent that I felt out of touch with reality. That same day I was surrounded by elderly women who had experienced widowhood to watch over me. They taught me what to do and what not to do as a widow. For instance, when I put my hands over my mouth, they would say, “you should not do that;” when I put my head down, they would say, “you should not do that.” Actually, they taught me how to sit in public and how to respond to people when they spoke to me. They taught me not to respond to people by just nodding or shaking my head. I was not allowed to handle money and had to bath thrice daily. I ate twice a day. I was asked to wear red cloth usually worn to funerals and wear a black headgear. It was like that to the extent that even when going to the toilets I had someone following me and had to be watched all the time by someone; I was totally surrounded by caretakers and people who watched over me. It was like that till the 40th day.”

Sometimes due to certain unforeseen circumstances, the traditional rules for observing the rites changes. This is what happened to Nora, another Christian widow from rural Ashanti as she described her experience:

“It is a painful, stressful and unpleasant situation. I was made to wear black mourning cloth and black slippers for 40 days. After his burial and funeral I was made to still wear those black clothes for 3 more months before I was allowed to wear black and white colored cloths. I ended up observing the widowhood rites for a year and four months because my husband’s uncle who was a good man and who my husband was supposed to inherit him on his death also passed away three months after my husband’s death. Instead of celebrating my husband’s one year anniversary, the family moved it for four more months to coincide with his uncle’s one year celebration. All this while I had to wait and continue to be in morning clothes till after the celebration before I could be relieved from widowhood.”

This Christian widow, Betty, from urban BA had her own reasons for observing the rites. This is how she described her experience:
“I went through the rites a little. Another widow was appointed to cater for me. As a widow, you are not allowed to eat any starchy foods, such as cocoyam, cassava and yam. I used to ask about why a widow was not allowed to eat those foods but they couldn’t give me any answer. I talked to my sister and we thought that in the olden days, the women weren’t allowed because of the risk of growing fat during the widowhood period, because as a widow, they remained immobile for forty days. I then agreed to do that. I was also asked not to accept nor carry cash or anything with me. I was asked to minimize talking. I didn’t really understand the part about the cash so I asked. I was not given a satisfactory answer. I ignored that but I think I got to know the reason why. For instance, I have lost three sets of keys to this house. One of my in-laws also bought me some lozenges. Up till now, I cannot tell where I put them. I didn’t do any intense rites because my husband and I are both Christians. But I wanted to know why there are many “don’t dos.” I wasn’t allowed to sit in the dew after 6 p.m. There was one particular day that I had not left outside after six. Dew was falling and I felt little chilly, so I reasoned that it was to prevent catching cold was probably the reason why widows were not allowed to stay out after six. I was asked to sit and not stand even to greet people. I asked why and still I didn’t get any satisfactory answer. The Priest and some of my church members had come to see me one day. I wanted to go and welcome them and show them how appreciative I was. I almost collapsed when I got up. I was very lightheaded and frail. This might be the reason why we are asked to remain seated. At least, to me personally, I found out for myself some reasons but not the rigorous rituals.”

Two of the three Muslim widows described their (similar) experiences of widowhood rites according to the Muslim tradition. Here goes Merri:

“As Muslims, we do not go through the traditional widowhood rites. Our husband’s family puts all the wives, three of us in his room and catered for us for four months ten days. During that time our sisters-in-law cooked for us. We ate three times a day, bath three times a day and were kept indoors. We Muslims do not have any dress code for the widow so we could wear any cloth. However, on the day of the funeral, they provide us with white cloth. After the 40th day, we were dispersed and each one went to our own homes. As a widow you have to be always in doors and cannot go out ‘frequently’ until after 1 year. After the widowhood period, you are left on your own, nobody cares or comes round to say hi.”

Traditionally, it is the husband’s family that controls the observerance of the widowhood rites and caters for the widow and her children. However, there are some widows who may observe the rites even if the family does not. The marriage of one young woman, Marian, in rural BA was in abstention for eight years. While she was in Ghana, her husband had travelled to Spain within few days of the marriage. He only returned to Ghana when ill, and for nine months she took him to searching for a cure. Eventually, he died and she described her experience of widowhood and widowhood rites as:
“The relationship between me and my husband’s family is not good at all. They even accused me publicly that I killed my husband. As soon as my husband died, my in-laws asked me to go to my home to begin the widowhood rites as they could not accommodate me. Traditionally, this is not done anywhere. Eventually, they secured a room in a stranger’s house for my use. What to eat, wear or where to lay my head was a daily challenge. It is said that widows are to be given shelter and living allowance but none of these were ever provided. My mother had to go begging daily for money to buy stuff like milo, eggs, etc for my upkeep. My husband’s family had asked that my mother (who had never been widowed) and my friends should supervise my rituals as they did not appoint anyone to oversee the rites I had to go through. My friends and family kept on telling me what to do and what not to do. For instance, I was to abstain from food on days deemed as ‘soul days’ or the day commemorating his death. Sometimes there were many things I would love to do but was told not to. To me widowhood symbolizes a departure from society. There are so many restrictions. Many people order you around; think for you, etc., and you feel stressed and hardly know how to handle yourself and anything for that matter. They took me through widowhood rites for about 3 months. I was like a prisoner. Even if I had to go to the toilets, I had to seek permission and be escorted. I never did anything on my own for 3 months until they ‘baptized me.’”

Curious about what kind of “baptism” this widow was referring to, I asked Marian for an explanation:

“While a widow, you were asked not to do so many things, such as holding money, remain seated, do not shake hands and also people will cook for you. They baptize you to release you from that. When they were baptizing me, they gave me money to hold, a cutlass, a basket, a sweeping broom, a traditional stove and things women normally use. They made me handle these items three times each and they said three thank you(s) at the end of each. Then I thanked them for the items. After that they took me through the town centre thanking people saying, ‘I am done with 3 months of widowhood rituals.’ If you are a farmer, they take you to the farm to touch the crops.’”

I still had a question as to why she observed the rites if the husband’s family refused to let her. This is how she explained it:

“Observing the widowhood rites is a tradition they make you go through. As for me, I really do not understand it properly because for someone to lose a loved one and go through that painful treatment makes no sense to me. All I can say is that it is a traditional rite that everybody passes through. It is a passage rite one passes through and one has no say. This is akin to the pain I suffered.”

The third Muslim widow, Hawa, described her experience as:

“As Muslims, we have our own rites different from the traditional widowhood rites. Normally, what happens is that the man’s family puts all the wives (normally there would be more than one wife) in a room and look after them for 4 months 10 days. During that time you eat three times a day and bath three times a day. Then as a widow you have to be always in doors and cannot go out ‘frequently’ until after 1 year. But my in-laws said they couldn’t do that for that long. We were
three wives so they kept us for only two weeks. When I came home I continued but I could only manage the rites for only a month.”

From their descriptions, it seems the Muslims version of the widowhood rites are less strict that the customary ones. The man’s family keeps the widows (normally they are more than one) in one room for four months ten day. They feed them thrice a day which is very different and less strict than the customary. I also think that since they might be many, the widows would have the opportunity of communicating and supporting each other. When I asked Hawa why she wanted to continue the widowhood herself when the family couldn’t. She answered as: “You know as a widow, I have to observe the rights because that is what Islam teaches.”

Not Observing Widowhood Rites

Akan tradition demands that every widow observes the widowhood rites after a husband’s death. Nevertheless, there are some widows who defiled such ritualistic observerance. Ten of the twenty widows from this study did not observe the traditional rites. They are all Christians. Five are from urban AS, four from rural AS and one from urban BA. Nine widows refused to observe the rites on the grounds of their faith as Christians. A widow, Rita from rural AS was not allowed to observe the rites. As she explained:

“My mother deserted us when we were growing up; I was just about fourteen (14) years old. With that experience, I resolved never to give birth to children, who were going to face hardships in life. I met this man, although he was older and had two older wives, I agreed to marry him because he was industrious. My husband died from a car accident after I had my second child. My first child wasn’t yet two years old then. It was very difficult after that since he had supported me with everything I needed. After his death, a lot of changes happened. In the beginning, since I thought all my help was from him and he was gone, it was very difficult and everything was blurred. I was susceptible to views from people. I kept thinking about how I was going to pay school fees and all those things that my children would need to survive. His family did not allow me to observe the widowhood rites because my husband performed only half of the marriage rites. Since the marriage rites were not complete, in the Akan custom, I was not regarded as a wife. You’ve got to be a wife before you would be allowed to go through the rites. Since then nobody from the family has even cared to ask about my children. Everything is on me alone.”
One of the widows from urban AS who stood on her Christian values and refused to go through the rituals described her experience as:

“I personally did not allow myself to go through the widowhood rites so I cannot be of much help with regards to detailed information of that. Initially after my husband’s death, I was asked to eat from one plate and use one bucket. When I asked them what was the purpose of doing that, they said after 40 days, they would throw away the items I used. I spoke to no one and even decided to eat from all the plates in the house so that when I am done they could throw away all the plates in the house. Then also when I realized they would always fill up a bucket with water for my bath, I decided to go ahead and use the shower in the house so that when I am done they throw that away too. I believe they are not sane for saying all those stuff. I do not like it when things are forced on me to make me feel sad especially when I pray to God to take me out of such miserable situations. That is how I see it.”

Another widow from the same area shared her experience of widowhood rites as:

“I stood my ground and said I would not indulge in any of those things and my God will protect me. I am a Christian and stood on my Christian principles. My own mother is dead. When I got to home, 3 of my mother’s sisters called me to a room and told me to put some kind of leaf into my vagina (place it under me) with the explanation that my husband would not visit me at night for sexual intercourse as he dearly loved me. I told them that as I had accompanied my husband to Accra and he did not inform me or prepare me of his impending death I am even looking forward to see him and ask him why. In essence, I told them I would not do such a thing or anything of that sort. Then one exclaimed and said ‘did I not tell you she would not do it.’ Then also on the day of the funeral they asked me not to bath and gave me something which I did not accept and told them I would take my bath in the bathroom. I refused all those requests.”

Another Christian widow described her experience like this:

“I did not personally observe the widowhood rites, because well, my husband and I are all Catholics and my parents are also Christians, so rites like a widows walking bare footed and having their hair shaved are unacceptable to us. Even if they had wanted me to go through the rites, I would have categorically refused to do that. One thing I noticed was that, before we celebrated the fortieth day of my husbands’ death, I used to go to church in black cloth. People refused to sit by me in the church either due to fear or that the outfit sort of intimidated them. Before anybody would sit by me, it meant that all the spaces in the church were filled up and they had nowhere else to sit. Likewise, I was also sort of ashamed to go and sit by anybody so I preferred to sit alone. After the fortieth day celebration I resorted to the wearing of black and white colored cloths. Those were less intimidating and generally acceptable everywhere. In my case, nobody could even tell me to wear black. I also know that when you go through the rites, a lot of painful and saddening experiences are visited on you.”
Perception of Widowhood/Widowhood Rites

After the widows had described their personal experiences of widowhood and the rites, I asked: ‘what did this all (widowhood & widowhood rites) mean to you?’ I asked this question to explore the widows’ perception of what they experienced or knew about the phenomenon of widowhood with its consequences. This is the response from one widow from rural BA:

“Going through the rites taught me a whole lot of things and that was how they took me through the widowhood rites. They taught me a lot of things I never knew about the culture. It really opened my eyes. Going through the rites prepared me to stand on my own feet without the man. Sometimes I feel sad and lonely but when I remember some of the things they taught me, it encourages me to move on, because I have five children to take care of and nothing I do will bring my husband back.”

Others have different perceptions of the phenomenon as a Christian widow from urban AS described as:

“Those widowhood rites are not helpful. The pain they go through during those times is not easy. The fact that you used to sleep together in bed with somebody, make plans, think together and go from one place to the other and then suddenly that person dies is not an easy thing to deal with. The emotional suffering widows go through, I feel it is not right that widows are stressed in the way it is always done. In the Akan tradition too, it is usually alleged that when a husband dies the wife perhaps had something to do with it. I do not believe the widowhood rites are acts that we should continue indulging in because the trauma the widow goes through is only understood by God. When external factors are added upon their woes, it then looks like they want to kill you off. I believe that through education, teaching people and enlightening people can go a long way to making things much better because I do empathize with the widows and believe that I would not be happy if it were me. I do not believe we have to continue with the widowhood rites. Although it may be tradition, times are changing so I believe the traditions that are not good and helpful need changing and especially if they will be beneficial to society then we must change them for the better. There are times when everything is taken away from the widow; the husband’s properties are all taken away from her. The man is dead and gone but then the woman or man and the children’s life should progress and not come to a halt.”

Two other widows from urban AS described their perception of the phenomenon in relation to the 21st century. One of them said:

“Those widowhood rites are not good. They reduce women to something else less than human. Women do not have their freedom and because most of them are illiterates they do not know their rights. They are told, ‘if you don’t follow the tradition and go through the rites, there will be consequences.’ I think most of these widows fear because they are told they would face
consequences if they refused to observe the rites. They are therefore coerced to go through the widowhood rites in fear.”

Another Christian widow from urban AS added her voice to the rights issues:

“I see the widowhood rites as an infringement on the woman’s rights. There are some of the rites that they will let you do just to pin you down, for example the wearing of the talisman or wearing black for one year. When you do that, then it means you have to follow their rules to the end. There are certain things you do not have to do because they infringe on your rights as a widow.”

Bad/Difficult In-Laws

The participants were asked the question, “What happened after your husband’s death? (Were there any changes in terms of place of residence, property inheritance/ownership, etc.?)”

This question was asked to explore the widows’ daily lived experiences with their in-laws in the absence of their husbands. It also touched on how widows and their children were being treated in terms of property rights ownership and their place of residence. All 20 widows described their experiences with regards to their relationships with their in-laws. Some of them described how relationships they had with their in-laws changed after the death of their husbands while others there perceive no changes. Thirteen of the twenty widows described bitter or problematic relationships with their in-laws, especially after their husbands died. Sometimes, widows’ problems were not with the whole family, but a few members. Actually, there was only one widow who reported having good relationship with her in-laws after the death of her husband. The remaining six widows, 2 Muslims and 4 Christians really did not see any difference.

One widow, Rosserta, from urban BA described how one of her brothers-in-laws, who was close to her and even came to eat from her house turned against her when her husband died:

“I never really had any issues with my husband’s family, not even after his death. It was his younger brother, who used to bother me. We were two wives; one in Accra and I am in Sunyani. This brother-in-law used to eat from my house sometimes. But when we were planning for the funeral he aligned himself with my rival and came to inform me that the family would organize only one funeral celebration but there would be only one name that would be publicized as the wife.
When I asked whose name was going to be used since we were two, he told me that my husband’s older children said if his church knew he was married to two women, they would not bury him so they would just write ‘Mrs. Johnson.’ I reported to their family elders and they called my brother-in-law for questioning. He told the elders that he does not know me and that his brother never married me. I was just a concubine and our children were born out of wedlock. This case was reported to the chief and elders of the town and his family elders. He was just trying to sideline me but he knew very well that I was customarily married to his brother. When he couldn’t prove what he said, they made him pacify his brother by slaughtering 4 sheep for disgracing his deceased brother. Since then most of my in-laws come to visit us except that brother in-law.”

There were three more widows who had a good relationship with their in-laws until the death of their husbands after which things turned sour. One of these widows described her experience with her mother-in-law after the death of her husband as:

“When I got married to him, my husband was already a cocoa farmer. He made me understand that the farm was given to his mother by his stepfather who adopted him. My husband was her oldest child whom she sent to school but because he could not finish, she asked him to come and work on the farm so that he would not be a destitute and have some money to take care of himself. We married for 17 years and all those years I was with him on the farm. We had a very good relationship between us and his mother. It was this stepfather’s funeral he attended and never came back. When he died, I had 6 children and pregnant with the 7th child. I was about four months pregnant when they came for me for the widowhood rites. After the 40 days’ anniversary of my husband’s death, his mother told me the farm belonged to her. My husband had already informed me about that issue. My husband had acquired a piece of land himself but it wasn’t a fertile land so crops do not thrive well on it. This was the land they divided and gave me a piece. My three younger children were seriously sick with measles and nearly died. When I told her, my mother-in-law told me that my husband was a caretaker of people’s farms and now that he had died, the landlord had taken back the farm. The farm had been given to another caretaker and my mother-in-law asked me sarcastically if the new caretaker will take care of me and my children. I told her I had heard her and will not blame her but blame death, for it is death that has put me in this predicament.”

One other widow, who respected and trusted she had for her in-laws religious figureheads, found herself being cheated and ‘slapped in the face.’ She described her experience with in-laws as:

“My husband passed away on January 15, 2005. His brother who happens to be a reverend pastor succeeded him. This brother-in-law came to inform me that the family us (my husband’s family and I) to organize a joint funeral celebration for my husband. I agreed and what that meant was that all donations from my friends and sympathizers would go into the joint collection bowl. Even when my
husband’s colleagues came to donate for me, I told them to put everything in the joint bowl. After the funeral celebration, another brother-in-law called me aside and told me that the funeral had incurred no financial deficit but as Ashanti custom dictates, it cannot be publicly revealed that we had realized a profit. When they made the announcement to the public, they failed to mention how much I had spent out of my personal money to organize the funeral. I did not challenge the announcement because he is a reverend and I respected and trusted him. When my brother-in-law, the reverend, visited me at home he told me that the actual amount realized from the funeral donations was over GHC 50,000 (approx. $33,337). He even suggested that we use some of the money to cater for the children’s school fees and upkeep. We were to go and see a lawyer to have letters of administration prepared for us but before we went, he (reverend) begged me to have the documents covering my plot of land (the house I live in with my children now) altered to portray my late husband as the real owner instead of my name. He said this was to avoid apparent shame at the fact that my husband did not appear to have any fixed assets and to show that at least he had a plot of land. I willingly agreed to the idea because I thought he was a pastor and I was not in the proper frame of mind due to all the thinking I had to do. The long and short of the story is that, after changing names and signing the documents, the reverend brother-in-law told me he was going to use half of the money to build two rooms on my land (which he had tricked me to sign as my late husband’s property). He was doing that for my 2 step sons. I have tried everything I can to stop him but nothing worked. So, the rooms were built and my two step sons are in. Now these boys serve as agents / spies for him. They tell him what we have said and not said and there no peace in my house on top of my poor state of living.”

Another widow from urban AS tried to have a positive relationship with her mother-in-law, despite her knowledge of her being quarrelsome. Then after her husband’s death, her mother-in-law showed her true character to her:

“My in-laws made things very difficult for me especially my mother in-law. She was a very difficult woman. Even before I got married, people came to warn me through my mother that the man that I am about to marry is a good man but his family members are quarrelsome. As at that time I was a young woman in love so I disregarded it and went ahead. Sometimes I would go to meet my mother in-law quarrelling with her own daughters (my husband had 2 sisters). It became clear later that the whole family is quarrelsome. When they pick up quarrels they all get involved but I could contain them just that I never wanted to give them any cause. It even came to a point when my husband did not want her in our marital home but I acted as in-between to let her, after all, she was his mother. Whatever she needed I gave her. Whenever I visited I would always converse with her, whatever I had I gave her. To me her true character was revealed when my husband died. I told her, had my husband not died, I would not have known she was such a bad person. The situation so bad but in all those I gave glory to God. The way my mother in-law behaved as if she did not know me and my 2 sisters-in-laws also did the same thing. hmm! I don’t know if anybody had or has
ever gone through what I went through. Within a week of my husband’s death, there had been a lot of problems. My mother in-law and my uncle-in-law, who happened to be the head of their family called for me. When I met them, he verbally assaulted me without any provocation. He said to one of my brothers that he had sent some family members to meet with me and I had been unwelcoming to them. I denied the allegations. What happened was that those family members came to meet me 30mins after I had arrived in Cape Coast from Accra, the very day my husband died. He again alleged that I had refused the food the family gave me and had also been against my husband’s idea of putting up a house in their hometown. Indeed my husband’s family had disgraced me and as for the verbal assaults, I could not escape them. During the one year anniversary celebration there were more insults, more verbal assaults addressed towards me. At some point in time I even slapped one of my sister in-laws, something I had never done before in my life. I later felt so sorry for my actions. That incident triggered a whole lot of other incidents for instance, his nephews and nieces wanted to give me a beating. I even left before the end of the ceremony. That is what I went through.”

There were widows whose relationships with their in-laws had never been cordial, never before or after her husband’s death. One such widow from urban AS summed it up proverbially as:

“Some women say they had good relationships with their husband’s family members but then when the man dies things then turn sour. In some cases some say they live peacefully with their in-laws and then when their husbands die, things begin to turn bitter between the widow and her in-laws. As for me I did not have it that way in my marriage. Even when my husband was alive it was not like my in-laws liked me so when my husband died I was not expecting anything any different treatment as it is proverbially said ‘Sè wòbèsi wo so a, anka wòhyèò wo ma’ (literally translated, ‘To be certain of a refill, you would have been given a full cup from the start.’) The way it was in the past is the same at present. Everyone minds their own business and it is not like anyone relates well with me. There is someone who inherited my late husband but up to this moment, we have not witnessed the sharing of any stuff of his in relation to what goes to who or that. I know that there are Letters of Administration we ought to sign but we have not and also, how well should I even put it, nothing has been shared up to this time, apart from the fact that I lived with him and have his clothes and stuff at home. A year after his death my mother in-law came over for some of his clothes as tokens of remembrance for her son. The car which we used when he was alive developed some engine problems so I took it for repairs but then the successor put it before my father-in-law said he wanted the car for himself in whatever condition the car was in. There was an educated gentleman who asked the inheritor what he would do in view of the interstate succession law. In the beginning when I was told of the request, I refused and said I will not allow it. But my father-in-law spoke to me and said if I would listen, I should just leave it behind so I did not go for the car and the inheritor want for it. Up to now, we have not done any Letters of Administration. We leave everything to God.”
Sometimes, some of the widows’ bitter relationships with their in-laws relate to the way and manner their in-laws properties handle the properties of their late husbands. One widow from urban BA described her experience with her in-laws in relation to her husband’s property as:

“It is only on a few occasions that when a man dies the family would be liberal about the funeral and property the man left behind. Most of them will just go after his properties. After my husband’s death his family came with the case that, they had no money at all to take care of the funeral. To me they were lying because their family is a middle class and they are rich. They brought a tall list of things they needed for the funeral. Even though he was their family member, they said they didn’t have anything and I was to take care of all the funeral arrangements. That was not normal but I paid because I didn’t want them to delay the funeral. After the funeral, the inheritor came with my mother-in-law with a tall list saying that they had to sell all my husband’s cars and assets. I told them that the car in the house was bought on loan so if they could pay off the loan, then they could have it. Since they couldn’t pay off the loan, they left it. The family then went ahead and sold his houses without my knowledge. But what they do not know is that I have all the documents on the houses with me and again whatever I am doing I have a lawyer and it also backed by the PNDCL 111. If I want to sell those houses right now, I can, because I have all the documents to them.”

Another widow from rural AS described her experience with her in-laws about how she was cheated on amount she should have been given from her husband’s savings; how she and her children were evicted from her matrimonial home and how the in-laws scrambled for other property her husband left behind as:

“I cannot tell you everything about how my in-laws really tormented me, fighting with me physically over the houses and plots of land. This house (the one we are living in), had not been completed when my husband died. Exactly 40 days after his death the family ordered me to move out of the completed house where I was living with my husband and children into this uncompleted one. I asked for some time and that brought about insults and a fight so I quickly looked around for money and just roofed this one and moved in. My in-laws took almost half of all that my husband left me and my children. At a point they even claimed that I had forged my husband’s signature to alter his will. When the case went to the lawyer, in fact, he did not joke with them, he really disciplined them. He happened to be the lawyer for the company that my husband worked for so, he knew of the documents already. My husband’s brother accused me and almost beat me up saying I had killed his brother. I was sad and felt so insulted by that baseless argument. How could I kill my husband? I left everything to God. Within the last four years, he has lost two wives all during childbirth. Now he would see how painful it is and realize that people who lose loved ones need care and love not the baseless accusations he was leveling against me. If we were to go by that, then he has killed two people as against the one he claims I have killed.”
Challenges of Raising Children

At the time of their husbands’ death, 14 of the widows had 48 children with ages ranging from 0 to 21 years. Three widows had older children and three never had children. Two of the widows were pregnant at the time their husbands died while eight of them were rearing children under ten years when they were bereaved. Within the typical Akan matrilineal culture, children born by women were automatically members of the family. It didn’t matter whether a child had a father or not, child rearing and child care wasn’t the sole responsibility of the mother because there were uncles, aunties and sometimes senior siblings to support child care and rearing. One of the widows from rural BA reflected on this matrilineal custom:

“Back then uncles took responsibilities of their nephews/nieces. Sometimes aunties and senior siblings supported making child rearing and child care kind of a shared responsibility. It really didn’t matter whether your father cared for you or not because everybody in your family wanted to see you grow and develop. Times have changed and Things have changed as well. These days even if uncles are willing, their wives would not agree to it. Back when we were kids, your uncle’s wife usually brought so much food that we were asked to bring our plates for some food but today because of hard times, your uncle has so little food that he eats inside his room can’t even consider giving some to anyone. These days too, even if someone offers your child a gift, that person is alleged to be a witch ready to use your child for witchcraft. It is like you are giving my child something in order to destroy him.”

Child care and rearing have therefore become the sole responsibilities of mothers when their husband died. Although all 14 widows who had children under 22 when their husbands died reported about their challenges of child rearing, the eight widows who had children under 10 years described their challenges. One widow from urban AS described how child rearing and caring are very challenging for the widow because the widow has to deal with double challenges; the widow’s own challenges of raising children alone and the children’s emotional challenges of missing their father. She then described her experience of raising children without her husband:

“Raising the children alone is not an easy task at all. There are certain times you have to be the father as well as the mother therefore raising the kids alone is a very big challenge. The kids have their own emotional times they go through; no matter what you do and even if you are doing your
best. I remember when one day my small girl told me how a friend of hers came to her crying one day alleging that her father mostly shouts at her. My daughter said she told her friend, ‘you are not serious, how I wish my father was alive to be shouting at me.’ That made me realize the emotional challenges these kids also go through. There were also the challenges of searching for the schools she likes and had chosen when she was ready for senior high school. She came to me and said, ‘Mama, had Daddy been alive he would have been taking me round visiting the schools, then you can rest.’ I really had to try very hard to hide my tears because I never wanted to shed tears in presence of my children. Sometimes it is difficult to handle such emotional issues.”

Sometimes your children may be watching you as the mother to see whether you feel what they are going through emotionally or sometimes they might even compare your actions to what they see other mothers or what people do when they miss a loved one. One widow from urban AS described her experience of such emotional questioning from her children as:

“After my husband’s death, I live alone with my children and the day they saw me wearing that black cloth, they asked, ‘Mummy is somebody dead again’ and I was like ‘What!’ If I were to continue with this life what I am going to let the kids go through? So I said, ‘no’, I will shake this thing off me! I decided not to do that to myself and to try to stop doing things that bring back memories and make me feel all sad again. Sometimes when I compare myself to other widows, even my children tell me ‘mummy we see widows but you are different.’ Then there was a time my youngest child, she was not even 4 years old, asked me a question. She said it appeared to her that I was not so bothered that her daddy was dead. Then I asked her how she would feel when I wake up in the morning and then just sit down in the hall crying and lamenting; my husband is dead, my husband is dead! She said she would cry too. Then I asked her again how she would feel if I woke up and decided not to go to work and instead stay at home and cry all day because my husband was dead; how would she eat, how would her school fees be paid? She told me she understood and that sometimes she hides behind a building in school and really cries. I told her all that was not really important. What was important was for her to do her best and make good grades in school so that it would be a good testimony to make her daddy proud. Anybody who sees her will say, ‘Damo’s daughter has done well.’ That was much better than wallowing in her sorrows. This is what I prefer. Such are some emotional confrontations I deal with.”

Sometimes, rising of children and all that entails becomes very difficult to handle single handedly. Proverbially, the Akan will say, “baako wre aduro a egu” which literally translates, if one person handles to many difficult and delicate problems, it gets out of hand. Two widows, one from rural AS and the other from rural BA described their experiences of raising their children single handedly. The widow from rural AS said:
“My greatest challenge now is my children’s education. My youngest son was 8 years when his father died. Now he is 13 years and in junior high 2nd year. He is left with just a year to finish. My older son is 17 and has completed school. He did not pass and so I have told him to rewrite the paper. After their father’s death they were both withdrawn from the international school and put through the regular public school where standards of teaching and learning are a bit lower. I even decided to enroll him, I mean my older son, in a technical school but the school is demanding GHC 800 (approx. $533.30). I decided to save some money but whilst I was making savings something came up that needed an urgent payment so I used what I had saved to solve that issue. All the money that I saved was gone. Hmm, I know God is in control.”

With the expression, *God is in control*, means the person’s totals surrender and trust in God, as the Almighty to handle issues in her live. The other widow from rural BA also described her experience of raising children, actually additional children by her son who was also dead. This is how she described her experience:

“You remember I told you about the orphans. There are 4 of them. Their mother died first and four years after, their father who was my son also died. When my husband was alive, we cared for them together. But now that he is gone and the cocoa farm I was hoping to use as ‘my backbone’ to handle financial issues is also gone, I don’t know what to do. I have no income whatsoever from anywhere. Right now 3 of the children are withdrawn from school and the one who finished the junior high school is still at home. I do not have money for him to continue. Raising these children in poverty has been a big, big, issue.”

Some widows face the challenges ‘squarely’ and let the children know and understand what is going on in relation to financial issues at home. One widow from rural BA described her experience when confronted with financial problems in connection to her children’s schooling as:

“One big challenge is taking care of the kids’ schooling. Last week the child whom I said is in secondary school came for his school fees. Although I had paid part of it and was left with GHC 200 (approx. $133.33) to pay, he was sacked from school and came home to stay. The next morning I told him to go back to school and told him God leads us and watches over us. Now I have no money. If you say you are going to be at home till I get the money, you will be here and your teachers will not know what is bothering you or would they wait for you. You will miss classes so you go back to school and tell your teacher that your mother is begging. She has a cassava farm and is yet to harvest so in a week’s time she would have the money to make the full payment. By God’s grace when he got to school he was not sent home again.”

Some widows try to find ways and means to handle the challenges of raising their children. One widow from rural BA described what she is doing day by day to be able to handle her
children’s educational needs. She described her experience:

“What really worries me is the life of my children, their day to day living and their school things, fees, uniform, etc. It would have been really difficult if I had not started this ‘kenkey business. (Kenkey is a corn meal). My husband was the one who took care of the children in terms of what they have to wear and their schooling. Personally I had never had to pay for my children’s school fees, haven’t had to buy books or even shoes for my children before. There was so much help from my husband about handling the children’s needs but after his death it became so much burden on me to the extent that anytime I looked for answers and help, there was none anywhere. That has brought so much worry upon me after his death. But, I decided to go back to the kenkey making. I used to make kenkey but that was for the house mostly. Then I used the money I got from donations people gave me during the funeral to start the kenkey making and now it is my business. Although I buy most of the things I need on credit, I am able to handle some of my children’s school needs, at least halfway. By God’s grace we are living one step at a time.”

Three widows from urban AS described their challenges of raising their children without their father or any father figure since most of their children were boys. One of the described how she was able to handle those problems by saying:

“It is very difficult if you do not have a man by your side especially when you have to take care of your kids, their schooling, etc. But being a worker, by God’s grace, the loans and other benefits we receive is what I use to take care of my kids. Sometimes I do not feel the burden too much but at other times it becomes really unbearable. They are boys being raised by a woman. As they were growing up, sometimes I felt I was meeting their needs in terms of role model and things they would have learned from their father, you see? I am a teacher and I know those issues are very important in children’s development. I am trying what I can by God’s grace.”

Another widow from the same area described her experience as:

“Well, you know it’s not easy to be a single parent. My girl never saw the father. I was pregnant when he died. As she grows, demands for her upkeep also grow, but all the same, I am still trying. So as I was saying, over here in this school, we are lucky as a staff to pay the fees in installments. When she was here with me for her primary school, we were ok. Now, she moved to a boarding school. Actually, I haven’t done or said anything to make her see that I am down or something like that. The way the Lord has also brought her up is commendable. I used to pray to the Lord to help me care for her. Anytime she asks for anything from me, I am able to meet her demands by His grace.”

The third widow from the same area also described her ways of facing the challenges as:

“Since my husband’s death, the challenging thing has been how to bring up the children, two boys and a girl. It was challenging in the sense that we were two bringing them up, but now one is not there. Financially it was a challenge to me, spiritually it was a challenge because I did not want them to go wayward and so all along you would see me talking to them, struggling to get them at
the right place. Bringing them up to be who the Lord wants them to be but not fall wayward was really a challenge to me. That was the most challenging thing to me.”

Poverty

All 20 widows reported and described how their single livelihood resulted in one way or another poverty in one way or the other. This is because they were two people sharing responsibilities (sometimes their husbands took the greater responsibilities) and now they were left alone to handle all financial responsibilities, resulting in very difficult situations. Nine widows never worked for any substantial amount of money when their husbands were alive. Five of these nine were working on farms with their husbands where the husbands were the ones taking care of any financial problem. Life after widowhood therefore becomes a challenge in terms of financial issues. One widow from rural BA described her experience of her poverty situation as:

“Poverty is my greatest worry. I have never worked anywhere apart from my farm work. I never went to school so soon after my marriage, my husband took me to Sefwi to work on the cocoa farm. I have a small farm but I don’t really get anything substantial from the proceeds. The cocoa farm is used for collateral so I can say it doesn’t belong to me now. Sometimes, I go to bed on empty stomach because the little I get I give to the children first. So poverty is crippling everything that I am supposed to do, especially for my children.”

Another widow from the same area described her experience as:

“Although I am preparing kenkey (corn meal) for sale but I do not have any capital so I buy most of the items on credit and pay back after I am done with the sales. So every week, I buy on credit and pay by the weekend and start again. As at now money is the biggest problem. The little profit I get goes to buy our house needs and right now I am really struggling to cater for the children’s school and health needs.”

A widow from urban BA described her experience of poverty as:

“I also feel the most impact of my husband’s death financially. It is true that I sell water but that is not enough. At times, it becomes difficult to make ends meet. I always pray to God to help me out. This is the difficult thing for me, about being a widow.”

In some circumstances it is health conditions of either the widow herself or her children that renders the widow poor. Other times it is old age and its corresponding consequences. A widow
from rural AS who is working but due to her children’s health conditions could not bear the financial challenges. She described her experience with poverty:

“**My main challenge as now is money. I know my two younger children are very brilliant and passed their senior high school exam, but I don’t have money to buy admission forms for them to fill out and pursue their education. My eldest son has also completed polytechnic. He says he wants to buy forms and do a top-up program to enable him get a job but because I don’t have the money, he is still at home. In the meantime he has written some applications for a job as a teacher in some of these private schools. He has been told to hold on till this third term is over and a new term begins. Adwoa, my younger daughter has also started schooling at the polytechnic. She is in her first year. The youngest is yet to apply to any school but due to monetary constraints I have told her to wait. My inability to support them through school is a source of extreme worry and a big challenge to me. I have no helper, only God.**”

Another widow from the same area described her experience as:

“**My major worry right now is money. I need money to eat, pay bills and attend hospital. There is not enough of it available so I try to manage. As for personal items like clothing and shoes etc, I have enough and so do not need anymore. Another thing that is worrying me sometimes is the fear of getting sick. That would make me incapable of doing anything and would further aggravate my situation. Those are what I would say are worrying me now.**”

Sometimes it is old age that incapacitates the widow to engage in any work and therefore renders her poor. A widow from rural AS described her experience as:

“**I am old, 81 years old and cannot work so sometimes when I need something or I am hungry it is not easy to get money to satisfy such needs. That makes me feel very sad. None of my children is working. I am particularly worried about my eldest son. He cannot get job although he tries and searches for job every time. All my worries basically boil down to monetary difficulties. I pray that my children can find work and become self sufficient so that they can cater for me too.**”

**Health Issues**

Three-quarter (15) of the widows interviewed were over 50 years of age. Although they survived their husbands, most of them have health issues they are battling. Some of them had those health issues before their husbands died. Six of them described their experiences of being widowed and at the same time having health conditions that cripple their activities and movements. One widow from rural BA who had some health issues and thought she was the one who would die first but instead her husband who was healthier than her died, described her experience as:
“I am a sick person, too. The sickness was there even before my husband died. I even thought I would be the first to die. I have hypertension and stomach ulcer. I once collapsed and was admitted for weeks because of other health issues I didn’t even know of. Since I was treated and discharged from the hospital, I have to take some kind of medication everyday. Money to buy my medication is a big problem as well. Sometimes, I ask, ‘why didn’t God take me first?’ He wasn’t a sick person like I am. I don’t know why.”

A widow from urban BA also described her experiences of health issues as:

“Health is my number one issue now. I have had hypertension and stomach problems for a long time before my husband died. He sometimes supported me with the medication but now I have to do that all by myself. Moreover, the little money that we were supposed to get from my late husband’s social security has not been given to us. This is a big problem for me. If I don’t take the medications, hmm, what happens? But truly, it’s difficult getting money to do that.”

Another widow from rural AS blames her poor health condition on the challenges she was going through as a widow and described her experiences as:

“Due to lack of money and its attendant thinking I now have high blood pressure. I don’t even have the money to buy drugs for it. Sometimes I even sell some of my cloths to get money to buy medicine. I should have been going for check-ups to see how my heath is, but I do not go. How can I pay for the drugs? All I do is to pray and depend on the Healer because I know He will not take us both and leave these children to become orphans.”

This widow from the same area in her 50’s was also the care taker of her old mother in her 90’s. She blames her sickness on something else other than the challenges she faced as a widow and described her experience as:

“I fell sick when I went to see to the sharing of a farm belonging to my mother who is old and cannot walk. The person who had been contracted to take care of it was selling the produce and spending the money. Unknown to us, he had performed some rituals in the farm so I believe I stepped on one of the items, that resulted in my sickness. I nearly died. My feet swelled up and started peeling off. I believe people should not be envious and greedy; we should just pray and work hard. If you have a problem with someone, talk it out with the person. All in all, I am living on my own, taking care of my mum and I believe God is taking care of both of us.”

A widow from rural AS described her challenges of dealing with 2 children with serious health conditions as:

“I am a teacher but when I get paid at the end of the month, I spend almost all the money on drugs. Because I have two children who are sickle cell anemic patients, I spend so much on their medication and that consumes all of my salary. All that we do each day is to pray the Lord’s Prayer
and ask God to give us our daily bread. We have always prayed that prayer and would never stop praying it. When I go to bed, I am always afraid of the next morning. This is because I don’t know what myself and my kids would eat. Amazingly, God always has a way of feeding us. Sometimes when we don’t get anything to eat we go to bed and pray for a better tomorrow. I am happy too that we do not get many people staying over, because anyone who does not know our state of living would say that I have deliberately decided not to cook so as not to give them food. It’s only my kids and I; who are privy to how we are suffering and how we make it through each day. This is exactly how we live our lives here.”

Another widow from rural AS described her poor condition of health as:

“Five years ago, around Christmas time, I fell down heavily and that has affected me tremendously. Since I was discharged from the hospital, that spot outside my house where you met me has been where I lay most times of the day. As you can see I am not very strong now so I cannot do much for myself and my children. It’s only through the benevolence of people that I survive. I started experiencing eye discomfort and I was taken to the hospital by my younger brother. It was diagnosed that I had cataract. An operation was later performed to correct the defect but I still cannot see properly so I am unable to go to church these days. The priests visit me and bring me Holy Communion. I must however say that I used to be a good Christian before all these happened to me. I went to church faithfully. Now I cannot but I continue to pray.”

Loneliness/Single Life

Some widows described how the impact of bereavement depends on the type of relationship both the husband and wife had in their marriage before the death. Three widows, 2 from urban BA and one from urban AS described the differences in the impact of widowhood depending on what they termed good and bad marriage. Good marriage is where the couple love each other very much and that showed in their relationships. They respect each other, support each other and their relationship or marriage becomes a model for others. Bad marriage, they described as one in which there is no respect and the man especially would maltreat the wife. One of them from urban BA described her experience by saying:

“If your marriage is a good one and your husband dies, it reflects and people respond to it. That is why I had lots of sympathizers when he died. There are some women who have been maltreated by their husbands. So when their husbands die, as humans, they feel the pain but not so much. They might even feel relieved from maltreatment. I accept that I suffered a lot during the early years of my marriage, because we were young and immature, but prayers saved our marriage. Our married life turned out to be an example for many people. From the day he died till the 1-week celebration,
it was very difficult for me. I was confused and felt deep pain in my heart for losing him but I didn’t know what to do so I was only praying. Even Moslems prayed for me, someone had told me. It is really difficult to lose a loved one. Sometimes I feel so lonely deep in my heart.”

Another widow from urban BA also described her experience as:

“Living as a widow isn’t a pleasant experience at all, especially if you had a good relationship with your husband. Loneliness, thinking and lots of things set in. That is why some people die after they lose their husbands. You keep thinking of all the things you were doing together. It isn’t everyone who has the courage to go through that. Life is full of mysteries and you get so lonely. Loneliness in itself is a disease, so being a widow is a disease, literally. I don’t know how else to put it. But most of the time, you get consolation from your kids, who keep you from boredom. Otherwise, you keep thinking and if you don’t have any money, then you are more depressed. At least if you are working, then the problems become a little bit lessened.”

A widow from urban AS described her deep loneliness not only on losing the husband but also not being able to have a trusted friend who is willing to help you as a widow without getting into trouble. She described her experiences this way:

“Challenges, Challenges! Living a single life is not easy. I cannot just imagine how it could be like, say, the women whose husbands trouble them feel less burdened when their husbands pass away or feel less pressured or they then have their peace of mind. But by God’s grace, the man that my husband was, he was not just a husband to me. Because I had no mother or father, he filled that gap. He was a blessing to all my siblings with regards to advice, life situations and sometimes financial help in difficult times. But now all these things are gone and no more. Sometimes you just need someone to whom you can turn to and talk about your worries and that is a situation you have to face alone because you have no one to talk to about it. One other thing I noticed also is that when you become a friend to a married man, it is assumed you are interested in him amorously. Do you understand what I am trying to imply? It is not easy. Sometimes too, someone you least expect to show interest in you suddenly does that thinking you are in need of love or companionship. That is also a situation that exists and it is disgusting. I do believe that single life is not easy. There are times you want someone to share your moments of joy and happiness with. Some trusted friends even do not have the time for you. The thing is whether you are happy or otherwise, whatever it is you have to take it alone. All these factors make single life quite difficult.”

Four widows described their loneliness situation due to the lost of their husbands who were their friends and companions. One of them from rural BA described her situation as:

“My husband and I became so close when we got married. We did almost everything together so I felt so much pain and hurt when he died. I was so overwhelmed with sadness. People say with time I will forget about this but I don’t think I will ever forget this, no, not me. I will never forget. There
are times when I go to bed crying. Sometimes people see me and say ‘eh Janet you have put on some weight’ and all I tell them is that it is by the grace of God. Ever since my husband died I have been having sleepless nights; I do wish anytime I feel sleepy I could just go off to sleep but when I fall asleep, it would be just for 5 minutes. I usually wake up from sleep at about 12AM or 1 AM. Normally have to be up from bed at about 4:30 AM to get ready to prepare the ‘kenkey’ so that by the time my children get ready for school, I would have sold some in order to have some money for them for school. That sleeplessness really gets me worried and brings about a lot of thinking and more feelings of loneliness.”

Another widow from rural AS described how her loneliness is affecting her as she said:

“I am a person who is not so interested in friends, my husband was my only true friend and so was I to him so much so that even today I rarely go out. I don’t have any friend here in this town. I do not go anywhere. I leave home for work around 6:30 am and return around 8 pm. When I come back from the market I do my duties and sleep. My children are my friends. I normally stay indoors and pray. Sometimes when I have difficulties with money and I get sad, I may be inside my room and be crying. Then I would hear a knock at my door and it might be one of my husband’s friends. He would console me and cheer me up and before he leaves he would give me something for the kids.”

A widow from urban AS also described her experience of loneliness and single life as:

“The much more difficult aspects of being a widow, is that, the man is no longer there to help with some things. Now, things he would have been responsible for are now my responsibilities as well, making things twice as difficult. I also miss his companionship. He was the one I talked to about everything. He was my confidant and friend. I miss that a lot because I feel like I do not have a friend that I can share everything with anymore. That saddens my heart very much. That makes me feel so lonely at times and keeps me thinking. Sometimes after several hours of watching TV, I just leave and retire into my bedroom. This situation makes widowhood very challenging.”

A widow from urban BA described the woes of her single livelihood and her experience of loneliness as:

“Beside all the hate and insults from my in-laws, my other worry has been the fact that within the seven years of marriage, I did not live with my husband as married couple and there have been many sleepless nights of tears and worry up until now. Although my husband was sick, I would have been happy if he had successful medical treatment and survived. What troubles me the most is the fact that I never had the opportunity of being with my husband and stayed lived as a married woman, as a wife. We never had children, too.”

Emotional Challenges

In addition to the feeling lonely or sad, there are some situations that make widows become emotional. Two widows from urban AS described experiences of their emotional moments. One
stated:

“Emotionally the only problem is the death of my second son. I have only 2 boys. That has shattered my dreams. They both completed their universities. The 2nd one studied computer science. He had a good job in the bank. He was rising up. Within 1yr he had gained promotion. Just about then he felt sick. 2yrs ago, in October 2008, he died. Up to now I have not been myself. The other one is here. He is not working. He lost his job before his brother died. It is really my son’s death that has shattered my life. This has been a big problem for me. My own family members did not offer me any help, especially my sister. You might not believe in witch-craft, but my family members have really troubled me because it is through them that my son died. They killed my son. A particular sister of mine whom I personally cared for through her training college years and also brought her and her 3 children to Kumasi to live in my 2 bedroom apartment are the causes of my son’s death. As it turned out, it was through their presence in my house that they gained access to my house. Through witchcraft, they killed my son and are trying to spoil my other son. As for my family members, they have really troubled me but I commend everything into God’s hands. They will never succeed the second time.”

The other widow, also from urban AS described her emotional moments as:

“Emotionally, honestly, I myself if not for my last born, the least thing I would break down and cry because the way the whole thing went, it was so shocking to me. Even though my husband was admitted for a long period at the hospital, I did not think he was going to die so early like that. We had just come to this place and were then trying to make friends. I was shocked and became emotional easily.”

Challenges of the Legal System

To the question about their knowledge and application of the government’s Intestate Succession Law (PNDCL111, 1985) to support widows’ rights to property, nine widows said they had heard ‘something like that’ but do not really know what it entails. Two widows had applied the law to get what was due them while two widows tried it and they were not successful. The remaining seven widows know about it but did not want to apply the law for various reasons. For the nine who said they had heard something about the law but did not really know it gave various reasons for not pursuing to apply it. The reasons given ranged from not being interested in applying the law because of their inability to read; people tell them it is too complicated to understand, too
costly to hire an attorney and they may feel embarrassed to speak in public. One widow from rural BA who heard you have to hire an attorney to speak on your behalf lamented as:

“Everything is about money. Where is that money going to come from? To take your case to someone to plead on your behalf you need money, for example. My husband was a farmer. He worked on his mothers farm but when he died his mother has taken over the farm so unless you get yourself a lawyer, how do you tackle such a case? However these lawyers want money and if you don’t give them the money they want, things usually don’t work out well.”

Another widow said, “I do not know much about that law at all and I don’t know what it offers.”

Four other widows from rural BA said the same that they just have heard about the law but do not really know what it can offer them as widows.

The two widows who were disappointed after applying the law described their experiences. One of them from rural AS said:

“I resorted to the use of the law by going to court to contest the sharing of my late husband’s properties which the reverend brother of his was misappropriating. Nothing has come out and I am so disappointed. It has taken a long time and no response from them.”

The other widow from urban BA described her experience as:

“The law didn’t help me as I thought. The money I was supposed to get is not yet paid to me. The inheritor was nowhere to be found and because he has used the money, he wasn’t willing to go court with us. The court is also not really enforcing issues to get that amount for us. However, they got only a small part of the total amount for us but it has taken really quite a long time, eight years!”

The two widows who were successful applying the law described their experiences. All of them are from urban BA. One of them described her experience of using the law as:

“I worked with the law. Although, my husband did not make a will, he had savings in his SSNIT (social security). He had already done the divisions on his social security and that was where the inheritor was disappointed because his name was not there. Therefore he didn’t get anything from my husband.”

The other widow had this to say about the law after using it successfully:
“I think that law is very good. I think that without it, families would have stressed widows and their children a lot.”

Widows who claimed they know the law but did not want to use it explained their reasons. Some saw property right as part of the Akan custom and also did not want to sever the relationships between their children and their fathers’ family members. Some of them said their husbands actually did not leave any property behind for them to fight for. Some however saw the ‘greediness’ of the in-laws who were after the properties of their husbands and thought of not worrying themselves by going after ‘worldly’ things but leave everything to God. One of such widows described her experience by saying:

“I know the law but I just didn’t want to stir up any controversies between me and my in-laws. So I did not bother to even consider it. If I had done that, there would have been a big controversy and I did not want that to happen, I only looked up to God.”

Another widow from urban AS explained why she refused to use the law after her husband’s death by stating:

“I do remember when my husband was about to die, he told me that when he married me he believed he had taken me through hardships but God did not just let my hardships go by unnoticed. And said, God shall bless me, my children, my children’s children and everything that cometh of me, He shall bless. I take it as the legacy my husband gave to me. That is why I am not so bothered about having to haggle with my in-laws or his relatives over inheritance issues. I am aware of the Interstate Succession Law. The day we went to court I got a copy for myself so I am aware of my rights among other things. But, personally, I do not think it is worth it to haggle over inheritance.”

Perception and Meaning-Making of Their Experiences

Finally, all participants expressed and described their challenges of being widowed. In addition of the challenges of widowhood rites they described those as painful and bitter as well as living in poverty, challenges of raising children and living as single mothers. The feeling of loneliness and lack of a true friend to share important issues with were also described by them as the experience them. What makes things worse for them is the ineffectiveness of the law to really
fight for their rights. In the chapter that follows I discuss the findings of the sources of protective factors that the widows applied for their continuous survival and functioning.
CHAPTER 5
RESULTS: PROTECTIVE SOURCES FOR WIDOWS’ FUNCTIONING

As discussed in the previous chapter, this chapter continues with the analysis of the widows’ description of protective resources. In their descriptions of protective sources for their continued survival, individual variation was apparent in widows’ well-being. The ability to relate socially with family, friends and others; take part in community/church activities and sometimes take some leadership/advocacy role to use her experiences to encourage others, especially widows, reflects a widow’s well being. Relative well being appears to be related to the widows’ ability to move on with life and perform their daily functions positively.

Income stability; supportive family and friends, strong belief in God and engagement in some church and social activities facilitate widows’ well being. Income stability in particular is fundamental and allows the widows to see to their personal welfare, that of their children and sometimes the welfare of other people. They are able to eat well, get enough sleep and engage in some income generating activities for more money to take care of her children’s health and school needs. They do not simply sit and brood over their husbands’ deaths.

Spirituality/Religious Sources

In their response to the question, “What would you say are the factors that have contributed to your continuous existence and functioning?”, 16 of the 20 widows attributed their continuous survival and functioning first and foremost to the Grace of God, “Onyame Adom.” These widows described their relationships with God, their quest for finding meaning and understanding of the challenges confronting them, as well as the meaning of their involvement in the community of such believers.
Most often as humans, when we face life challenges people start questioning, why me? Why at this time? Why such a burden? etcetera. From the findings of this study, many widows do the same. Among the many thoughts running through their minds, they question God as to why their husbands should die. One widow, Hawa, reported of questioning God why He should take her husband but not her because she was the one weaker in health. Thus in their quest for answers, they come to understand that God does not hate them but loves them and that death is natural. They become “healed” by these ‘answers’ from God and begin to get more involved in church and community activities because, they are alive for a purpose.

One widow, Rita, from urban BA responded to what has aided her continuous survival as:

“It’s God. It’s just by His Grace, I wouldn’t have survived. The love I had for my husband could have destroyed even my faith in God when he died. But it has been 10 months since he died. God’s ways are not our ways. On the day that my husband died I had been dry-fasting and it was all prayers even when I had no money. I believe God’s time is the best and God does not hate me. It is in the Bible that God will never give us what we cannot handle. I know my burden is heavy, but I believe God will give me the strength to carry it through.”

A widow from rural AS who was cheated by her bother-in-law described her relationship with God:

“I would first of all attribute my current state of life to God, by whose Grace me and my family are still alive. You remember what I said happened to me because I completely trusted my husband’s brother who is a reverend pastor? Look at what a supposed man of God did to me, a widow with children! I put all my trust in God and not in man. I try very hard to live a holy and pious life. I am very serious with my church attendance, prayers and involvement in church activities. I pray with my children fervently and unceasingly. In totality I would say it is God almighty who keeps me and my family alive.”

After their husbands’ death, life became unbearable for some widows that they felt their only resource was to turn to God and strengthen their relationships with Him. Seven of the twenty widows reported that they looked up to their husbands for their needs as well as their children’s needs. Five of these seven were working on farms with their husbands where the husbands were the ones taking care of any financial problem. One widow, Jane, from rural AS who depended solely on
her husband for her financial needs and was shattered by his death, described her use of spiritual and religious sources for survival:

“By the grace of God, I was able to survive. I realized that it was by the grace of God that he (husband) had all his wealth. I resolved then to fend for myself and my children without him and do well at it. His family members took care of us till after the forty days, when they asked all of us, the 3 wives, to go our ways. We didn’t even know the man who inherited him. He didn’t bother anyone with anything. The grace and mercies of the Lord are what kept me going. The strength to get up in the morning and go to work, is a big favor from Him to us, I believe. By His grace, I do not have any issues with anyone again. I used to be very saucy. At first, if anyone hurt my feelings, I would never talk to that person ever again. I was very temperamental. But now, by God’s grace, I am healed of that. I am not moved to react by what people do or say to me.”

Another widow from rural BA who worked on the farm with her husband described how her feeling of hopelessness turned to focusing on God. She described how her believe in God as the problem solver and provider strengthened her faith and relationship with God:

“When my husband died, I never thought I could survive till today that I am talking to you. It’s just by the grace of God. Look at a widow with 6 children, the 7th in the womb and without any source of income or financial support. I knew I could not survive the ordeal. But in my situation of not knowing what to do, I turned to God. I focused on my relationship with God; I did not play with that at all. I believe in God because when you put your burdens unto Him, you know you have given them to a higher being. Also when you are in such a situation, you usually do not tell your friends all your problems but you can present all your problems to God. When you tell them to Him, He reveals to you how to deal with your issues. I will say, by His grace, I’m alive!”

Hawa’s husband was the controller of the family finances. She described how she had wished to be the one dead instead of the husband because she thought her husband could better support their many children and was also healthier than her. She described how her constant relationship with God has strengthened her:

“It’s only by the grace of God. I can’t even know and understand how He does it. Sometimes I wonder why He didn’t take me first because I was the sick one. I don’t have any income, just few stuff from my small farm but to be able to survive, me and my children, it’s only God who can do this. I pray always for our survival. Like I said, I wished I was dead. Then I thought about it and said, ‘Lord, help me to cater for these orphans till they are grown and can be on their own before you take me away. That’s what has been my prayer every day.’
Another widow from rural BA also described the spiritual source of her survival:

“I know it is by God’s grace and His power and also for the fact that I am not sick. God has given me some kind of strength to survive and take care of my children. As at now had it not been the grace of God, I would have messed up and it is a fact that God is with me and my trust in Him has given me more faith and progress. I have come to the realization that whatever the situation, God is always with me. I have renewed and strengthened my faith. There have been very difficult times; extremely hard times that I didn’t know what to do but to pray. One day a man we used to live with, whom we attended school with some long time back, when he heard my husband was dead came over in his car and gave me GH 50. That has made me realize how awesome God is and I have so much faith in Him.”

Another widow, Lisa, was sick, old and poor prior to her husband’s death. But with the two of them, things were better. Now single and still sick, she described the sources of her continued survival as:

“How could I go through all those painful situations and be still alive even with my sickness? I didn’t know or have answers to what happened. I used to go to church and involved in church activities when I was strong but now I cannot. So the priest brings me the Holy Communion at home. I depend on the body and blood of Jesus for my strength and continuous survival. I pray my rosary, too.”

All 13 widows who reported encountering bitter relationships with their in-laws after their husbands’ death, also reported that it was in the state of their ‘double jeopardy,’ (widowed and maltreated by in-laws), that they found solace in God and continued to deepen their relationships with Him. One widow from rural AS described how God answered and continues to answer her prayers when she thought all was lost:

“Due to the treatment that was meted out to me after my husband’s death, I never thought I could survive in this life. I looked at my empty pockets and bank accounts; my children’s school fees, electricity bill, hospital bills and I really lost all hope. How was I going to survive with my children? Where were we going to get ‘some roof over our heads, after we’ve been thrown out of my matrimonial home? God is my everything because he is the one who has kept us till now. Sometimes it is amazing how we get money for our needs. People just help us out of the blue. God is good and His grace is amazing. I always pray and thank him. When you become a widow, let God be your help and all will be okay. I am a Methodist. Every morning I have morning devotion with my children. I am a member of a group in my church; they advise and console us every time to see to it that we are happy. God is good all the time.”
Some widows go beyond what they believe God can do for them. They take the word of God as their banner, as the truth statement and live on the message it provides. They believe God is speaking to them directly through those messages. Those messages, according to the widows, strengthen their faith and their belief in God, open their minds to understanding that life and death are God’s creation, and in addition, energize them to live positive and productive lives.

One widow from urban AS who reported that drawing on God’s word helped her to have a positive livelihood:

“It is by God’s grace and His word because like I was telling you about the book of proverbs, I know that I am not supposed to be idle and feed on sorrow. I have to do my best. As His word says in the Bible, for instance, the manner in which my husband died. It was alleged by people that he was murdered; some even told me he was used for ritualistic purposes. That is something that puts fear and disbelief in people. But God’s word says He holds David’s key. If He closes a door, no one can open it and if He opens a door, no one can close it. I am not saying I am such a holy person that is why I am alive. It is by His grace, according to his plan. That has helped me a lot to stand firm and I know God is with me. His word says if I put my trust in Him, He will make me like a tree planted along the river bank and will never wither so, I shall prosper in whatever I do. One thing that also really helped me immensely is my belief and trust in God. Had I not known God, I would not have known to withstand such situations, because like I have told you, I had no mother, no father before I got married. God gave me a husband who was like a missing link so when he died, it was a time that I should have been very miserable and depressed. I do remember when my husband was about to die, he told me that when he married me he believed he had taken me through hardships but God did not just let my hardships go by unnoticed. He shall bless my children, my children’s children and everything that cometh of me, He shall bless. I take it as the legacy my husband gave to me. That is why I am not so bothered about having to haggle with my in-laws or relatives over inheritance issues.”

Another widow from urban BA described how her application of her belief in God and his word helped her positive transition to ‘normal life’:

“First and foremost, I’ll say it’s the Lord. It was and still is by His grace that I could survive through that ordeal. As I depend on the Lord, His word has helped me stand on my feet. The Lord really helped me to stand with the help of my family and the church. I pray always and also listen to gospel songs when I am alone. Sometimes I sing and praise God to get me out of my sadness. When I wake up in the morning, I pray and cast myself into his care, I pray as well for my children, my family and friends as well as my church. In situations like what I am experiencing now about my husbands’ death, my only comfort and refuge is God. Sometimes when I feel so low and sad, I find consolation in Christ. I look upon to the cross and rely on Him for the strength to move on. I know
that no matter how much I think about it, I cannot bring him back and that we will only meet up in heaven. I might still not even see him, because up in heaven, there is nothing like marriage, we were only married here on earth.”

Getting involved in church activities was another strategy some of the widows employed to support them through their sorrow. They enjoyed involvement in church activities, drew strength from them and felt energized. A widow from urban BA applied the word of God to understand her life’s situation:

“It’s just by God’s grace that I can stand on my feet now. I was there at the hospital that my husband died. At the hospital, I asked the people who wanted to drive me home to rather take me to the Mission house so that a priest could pray for me. We met the Assistant Priest who did pray for me. Later on, the Parish Priest came to my house. When he came, he told me he couldn’t think of anything to tell me, since he knew my husband and I and how our marriage had fared. However, he asked me to tell the people gathered there about what I used to tell my husband when something like this happened to others. I sat for a while thinking and then eventually, I answered that, ‘I now accept that everything in the Bible is the true. The Bible has said that out of two people lying on a bed, He shall take one and leave the other. That statement is true to me today.’ What really helps me is receiving the Holy Communion at mass every day. By God’s grace, I always feel energized afterwards. I also sing as a chorister, which relieves my pain because I concentrate on learning and enjoying the lyrics of the songs. I volunteer for other church activities including cleaning and decorating. These activities also divert my attention from my husband’s death. The church groups that I am a member also help me a lot. I am a member of St. Anthony’s Guild at church. We pray every day and they pray for me even when I am not around. Sometimes they come to see me to pray with me when I am unable to go to the meeting.”

Another widow from urban AS also described how she used her involvement in church activities to keep sorrow from her life and lived positively:

“Spiritually I am ok now. I was really shattered after my son died, doubling my sorrows. I didn’t want to stay home alone after I close from school so I got involved and devoted myself to church activities. I am the church board treasurer. That keeps me busy working on some money calculations and subtractions in the evenings and takes away boredom and sorrow from my life. I do not play around with my relationship with God, since I know I can talk with Him directly about my needs.”

**Economic Stability as a Protective Source**

Economic stability was one of the major problems confronting many of the widows in this study. Becoming a widow, a single parent and handling the financial issues in the family single-
handedly, overwhelms many widows who do not have stable income. In this study 8 widows reported having some regular income that helped to support them and their children financially. However, only four of the 8 reported having stable income they can count on. One such widow, Anita, a teacher from urban AS described what she does to maintain her financial stability as:

“Apart from my job I engaged in the buying and selling of goods in order to earn some money to support myself and take care of my siblings. Such self-dependence is something God endowed me with so that in times of difficulties, I will still have some kind of financial source. After my husband died, a friend of mine who owned a poultry farm used to bring me eggs to sell. Actually many people assumed that was not something I could handle but I proved them wrong. I put up signboards at strategic locations to give directions to the house. Then I started going round to places and asking people if they wanted me to provide them with eggs. Initially I started with 3 crates of eggs then after a while by God’s grace I moved up to 100 crates a week and also took some to supplies. Then one day when I was about ready to go out and buy some crates of eggs, my children started complaining, ‘Mama you are tired, mama you look too tired.’ That morning I did not go out selling. The next day I gathered up all my crates of eggs and sent them over to a friend who also sold eggs and told her I am done with selling of eggs. I had some friends who travelled and traded in shirts and other stuffs. Whatever they brought back, I took some and sold them and this is what I still do. Men’s shirts, all men stuff, shoes and everything. Now I have a container down there. I sell mattresses and other stuff. By God’s grace I sell almost everything. It is really by God’s grace. I do have some friends too who do send me money from time to time to support me and help with the upkeep of the children and that also helps me out immensely.”

A widow from urban BA who manages her own enterprise described her economic stability as:

“For me, I’ll say because I work, I am financially sound for now. I am a baker and have about 10 workers I have hired to help. My income, by God’s grace caters for our needs. I’m grateful to God for that. But if you consider the widows who don’t work, then the problem of widowhood becomes compounded.”

Another widow from urban AS described her financial stability as:

“By the grace of God, I am alive and working. I am working as teacher and at least expect a monthly income. I manage with whatever resources I have at my disposal prudently and my God, He is the ultimate. I have a monthly income which means at least for every month, I know how much I will earn. I continue to commit my life into His hands daily to take care of me and my children. If I get more I am grateful because sometimes hardships do occur, and this can help me to take care of myself, my children and other people who are in need.”
Another widow from the same urban AS area also described her financial stability as:

“Well, by God’s grace, life is not so bad. With the work I am doing and what I am earning, I am able to support myself and my daughter. I am teacher by profession and I get paid at the end of the month. Although, the salary is not sufficient, I manage and also get loans from my bank to support my daughter’s educational needs.”

Living in the city and doing business has far more advantages than doing the same in a rural area. Due to the husband’s death, one widow from rural AS who had lived and worked in the urban area had to relocate to the rural area. Sickness and low sales had reduced the income level. Despite these hardships, she continues to do petty trading to keep her income stable:

“I was living in Kumasi with my husband but after his death, I relocated at Kotei, my home town. I used to even sell cloth and other things in Kumasi where I had a lot of friends who could help me in times of need and also even if you are strong you might be able to do something for yourself. Kotei is a small town but I try to sell a few items. I used to sell cloth when I relocated but the people were reluctant to pay when I gave it to them on credit. Due to the injuries I sustained when I got sick I cannot go about chasing them so now I only sell some plastic bags and bowls. Even with that, I get something which is better than doing nothing. I have also been managing on the amount that I got when my husband’s pension was shared. Even recently when I fell sick, that was what I used to pay my bills and other needs.”

Supportive Family/Friends

After discussing their faith in God, all 20 widows reported the support of family, friends and church members. The importance of the physical, emotional and social support that family and friends give cannot be overstated. All widows reported that without such a support, a widow cannot survive the trauma of bereavement. Although the family or friends may not have money to give, their physical presence coupled with emotional and social relationships and communication greatly help in stabilizing the widow.

Some widows reported support from members of their husband’s family. Some brothers and sisters-in-law cared for the children as their own and gave whatever help they could to the widow. One widow from urban AS described how the support from family, friends and church members helped greatly to restore normalcy and confidence in her family:
“Initially one of my husband’s siblings by His grace took two of the children to live with him in South Africa. After a period of time he decided to bring the kids back to me. I am grateful to God for that because in a way it gave me a breathing space although the time he brought the kids back, things were still difficult. Because we had separated for a long time the reunion was something that helped us all tremendously. I also have a pastor friend and through God he has been a blessing unto me, Pastor Ola. There is nothing he wouldn’t do for me and my kids. He treats me like a baby. God has been a blessing to me through him and his wife, she is my mother. It is all by God’s grace. He has us at heart.”

Another widow, Connie, also from urban AS described her experience of support from friends, church and one brother-in-law:

“Friends, church members and most especially my pastor have been very helpful. My friends also stood by me. A cousin of my husband was sympathetic and empathic to my cause. He defended me whenever they went for family meetings and whatever they plotted he came to tell me. He lives in the US so he went back. But when he was here, he helped me out immensely, especially with financial support for the kids’ school fees.”

Another widow from urban AS described her family, friends and church support:

“My husband’s friends were very helpful to me. The two friends that I also made in school were also very helpful to me. The church actually played a very important role. They helped a lot as far as sending my children to church; at times even some of the members will come and take them home, take care of them and bring them to me. They helped me in bringing them up spiritually. As for my family and my husband’s family because of poverty they could not actually contribute anything. As I said earlier on they just washed their hands off us and my family, I can say that I am the only educated person among my mother’s children so they look up to me so they do not have anything to offer me in terms of money. That is how it is like but the church, my friends and my husband’s friends did a lot for me.”

In times of bereavement, most widows preferred the presence of their own parents and siblings. Some mothers of widows were of Akan heritage, understand the customs and helped the widow to go through the rituals smoothly. Some Akan father and siblings of widows rejected some of the harsh widowhood rituals. Two of the widows reported that they didn’t go through the widowhood rites because their big brothers told their husbands’ family that they would not allow their sisters to observe such rituals. A widow, Harriet, from urban AS described her experiences of being surrounded by her family, friends from work and church members:
“My parents also contributed a lot to my survival. My family, my brothers and sister were all
around me and supported me to stand strong through the early years of that tragedy. My church
members and the church activities I got involved also really occupied me. If I don’t go to church,
then I listen to gospel music. And my colleagues at work were also a factor that contributed to my
survival. When I get to work and see my colleagues and their stories they would tell for us to laugh,
my mind gets off my worries and that helped me a lot.”

Another widow from urban BA described her experience of having her family around her
during those difficult times of her life:

“When my husband passed away, my mother was here, supporting me through the hard times.
Because his family abandoned him and his health care was all on me, I incurred some debt. The bill
for his admission to the hospital amounted GHC 800 (approx.$528). Out of that, I contributed GHC
300, which was all my savings; my sister contributed additional GHC 300 and my father paid the
rest. When we got home from the hospital, we had absolutely nothing to live on. It was my family,
especially my mother who supported me through, including his medication. They supported me
with his medication and feeding even before he died.”

Another widow from urban BA described her experience of support from her mother:

“With regards to my immediate family too, my mother stays close by and is always with me. She
and I do a lot of things together to keep me from being sad. My children have been a source of
strength for me as well, always keeping me company and making me happy.”

Some women’s groups within some Christian churches, take responsibility for providing the
physical, emotional and social support that the widow needs to encourage and empower her.

Sometimes members of these women’s groups stay with the widow and protect her from abusive in-
laws. Sometimes they use their religious beliefs and refuse to allow their ‘sister’ (the widow) to go
through the widowhood rituals. A widow from urban BA described her experience of such support:

“During the funeral, my church group was helpful. They appointed three people to stay with me for
three months here in my house. Later, two more came to join, making five. My family was also
there; three of my mother’s children, my kids and two of my late husband’s nephews. My house was
full of people. I was never left alone or depressed. My comfort came from them. My son who takes
care of my husband’s business also is here. He sleeps here every day.”

Another widow, also from urban BA described her experience of support from friends and church
members as:
"Well, I would say I get my source of consolation from my friends, my church and my children. I am a teacher and my colleague teachers are very good, always encouraging me and talking to me which has helped me a lot. Sometimes too, I watch movies. I watch a lot of Nigerian movies. Sometimes I can watch TV for long hours. Friends from my church always pass by my house to check on me. Above all these, I always pray to God for consolation because it is only by His grace that I am alive."

Some churches go beyond the physical, emotional and social support and add financial support to ease the widow off some financial problems.

"In terms of my relationship with God and my church activities after what happened, the church had a welfare which helped me. Our congregation has a small size of membership and our Agape society also helped me out financially. They gave me an amount of GH 300. I also attended a Bible class and they also helped me out financially with GH 400. These tokens and consistent prayers helped me so much to the extent that I was able to start this ‘kenkey’ business just at the time schools reopened. That also coincided with the kids’ schools reopening as well. My in-laws also came to officially ‘divorce’ me after the widowhood, meaning they will no longer give me house-keeping money so I used the money I got from my church to do various stuff here and there. That is how it has been with me."

Focus on What They Can Do

Four of the 20 widows focused on what they themselves can do to improve their lives and that of their children. Instead of sitting and hoping for help from somewhere or someone 5 of the widows focused on what they themselves could do to improve their livelihood and that of their children. Widows reported that raising children is one major problem Most of the times, this has been the bone of contention between widows and their husbands’ families. But one widow from urban AS described her experience of focusing on what she can do:

"I do believe my children are my responsibilities. I do not know if my husband knew of his imminent death because when he was alive he used to tell me how some of his friends told him that they would not like to marry an educated woman but he is pleased he did marry a career woman so that one day when he is not around, his wife can take care of his children. It is one thing that makes me hopeful [I do not know if one can look back on earth] because I know that wherever he is he would be expecting me to take up that responsibility, hope you understand. That is how we live."

Another widow from urban AS described how she focused on improving her livelihood to meet the challenges ahead of her as a widow and single mother:
“I had done my diploma so after my son’s death and after considerable thought I had to do my post-diploma in teaching so by December 2010, I will be done. At the time of my husband’s death, the eldest had completed 6th form and the youngest one was in SS3. I had never considered getting remarried. This is because the person may love you but not love your children. So I decided not to remarry and said to myself I will put myself into God’s work and keep me going. Being a widow does not mean you have to sit down and brood over the death all the times. Do something with your life. If you are already working, go ahead and continue with your work. Myself, I engaged in some buying and selling just to help me out, I do some extra classes for some students to support my income. I do not want to depend on anybody. I want to stand on my own feet. I even help out my siblings financially. You have to stand on your own feet. Unfortunately for some widows they do not work so if their husbands’ die, then their world comes to an end. This is what is troubling. But even then one must look for something to do; if it is a loan that you need to start something you can, go ahead but do not sit idle and brood over it all the time. It has happened and you cannot do anything about it. So you get on with your life and ask God for strength. That has been my experience. I put it behind me and move on with my life.”

Getting involved in some kind of economic ventures has been one way that some widows employ to improve their livelihood both physically, emotionally and socially. Focusing their attention more on their projects gets them busy and allows them to interact with many people (sellers or buyers) which improves their emotional and social capacities. One widow from urban AS described her experiences of how focusing on improving her livelihood:

“Well, with regards to companionship, you have someone to talk to but I do not have anyone like that. So what I do is to go to church, come to school and during weekends, go to the market to sell my things. I have a store of clothing in the big market. That, I’ll say is my daily routine that occupies me to move on with my life.”

Another widow from urban BA described her experience of how her plans of focusing on what she can do:

“Ok, right now, what bothers me a bit is the fact that because my husband died suddenly, we were not able to complete a plan we started. We had decided to build a house together, so we had already gone for a loan. By God’s grace, I have been able to pay that off. I want to start my own business now, and I know that by His grace, my children can help me. However, because of all the issues of them raising their own children and the fact that their husbands are in school, I am holding off on that for now.”

A widow from rural BA described her plans to focus on improving her life and that of her children. She entered into business to help her provide for her children and school finances.
“The preparation of the ‘kenkey’ (corn meal) too has been of immense help to me. Every time it gets to Saturday and Sunday, I begin to fret because I do not have money. When it is time and it gets to Monday and by God’s grace the next morning arrives and I start work when I come back home I usually come back with money so the items and stuff I usually get on credit would be paid. What would be left would then be used for food. When I come back I ask some of the kids to go buy some meat, sometimes too the fish I purchase for the ‘kenkey’ business, I fry some and use to prepare food and soup and that is what we eat in the course of the week. This is what has usually helped me to progress further in life.”

Take Leadership/Advocacy Roles

In their responses to the question of what advice they would give to other widows, especially new ones since they had gone through it and have the experience of being Akan widows, most participants said they would base their pieces of advice on their experiences. Thus, responses from participants took different forms. Four of the widows had already taken it upon themselves and were educating new widows, visiting and encouraging them. One widow from urban BA had been visiting, advising and encouraging widows long before she became one. She described her experience:

“I already work with widows. I was doing that before I became one, but this has strengthened me and given me new insight. I used to go out to them to console them and to aid them financially when I could. However, from how people reacted to mine, I have realized that I wasn’t doing much for them at all, even financially. Now, whatever I was doing for them, I am going to do more.”

Another widow from urban BA had been visiting widows who didn’t know about the PNDCL 111 existed and helped them to understand how it could work for them. Even though her husband made a will, she nearly lost her right to the part of the property she deserved, had it not been for the fact that she is literate and knew the law. Nine widows from this study reported not knowing anything about this law, which came to force in 1985. Even those who knew about it didn’t want to apply the law for many reasons including financial burdens and time. She described her experience of educating and empowering widows about their rights as:
“Right now, what I do is to go to some widows I know, who have no idea that the law exists and talk to them about how it can help them. I think that widows, especially the uneducated ones, should be educated on this law and how to help themselves.”

A widow from rural BA promised to go round using her experience to educate widows and even women in general about what happened to her. Her husband died in a motor accident and that could happen to anybody. She described her plans:

“What happened to me was so bad that I felt it will be better if I were dead and then I thought of who would take care of the children so I will advise whoever becomes widowed to look up to me and follow my example and pray to God because He has plans for all widows. God will take care of you and just look at how far I have come for it is the will of God and not by my own strength so just emulate me. I will be able to advise them in so many ways so they should follow my example and use me as a yardstick to assess themselves in many ways.”

A widow from urban AS had also been going round teaching widows that death is part of God’s creation.

“My advice to widows is for them to know that as for death it is with us whether we like it or not. Before my husband died that was what he said. He said ‘my dear I am only taking the lead, I am not the first one and not the last so take heart.’ So anytime I see a widow mourning, it is very painful, very, very painful so I advise the person, ‘you cry but after crying if you are tired, you stop and give everything to God and then be focused. If you make yourself, let’s say, dejected and you get derailed, there is nobody who will come and say sit down and I will be feeding you. You have to be yourself and try as much as possible to struggle to be up and God will not leave you like that. The moment you start doing things the right way, God’s way, He will help you through and even though you will face problems, you will be able to overcome the problems so that is the advice I always give. Even if you cry, he will not come back so why not stop and then see the next way out.”

Three widows described some widows who began drinking and became alcoholics or prostitutes. Instead of focusing on how to improve their lives in order to be able to care for their children, they falter and their children become wayward. Some widows had lived and enjoyed life because of their husbands’ positions so without their husbands they felt their status had been lowered, but still wanted to maintain such status. Their desire to do that led them to prostitution to get the money to maintain their high standards of living.
One widow from urban AS had been advising widows to stand strong and firm for the sake of their children. She described how she did that as she said:

“My advice to widows is that, firstly, the fact that their husbands have died should not mean the end of the world for them. They have to move on, they have to stand firm so that God can help them. Some say they have no helpers or support from anyone. God is indeed our helper because man’s help comes to an end but God’s help is forever. As human beings, we readily have enough of each other. Even look at the introduction of phones, sometimes when you call it tells you ‘out of coverage area.’ You do not even have access to the person to talk to. God always has an open mind for us so they should make up their minds that despite all that has happened, there is no need for prostitution, there is no need for them to mess up their lives. They should be strong and stand firm to be able to take care of their children. Some even tell themselves that because of their achievement or the heights they have attained when their husbands were alive, perhaps in a position they held they find it really difficult to step down during hard times but that should not be the case. When one falls down it is not the falling down that is seen as important, it is whether you are going to remain on the ground fallen or you rise up. God is also ready to lift us up so, they should stand firm and put their trust in God.”

Another widow from rural BA described her experience of her encounter with widows and their different stories and how she would use those stories to advise widows by saying:

“When you become widowed, many friends become closer to you. When it becomes difficult for you to handle, they give you alcohol, they purchase it themselves and give it to you to drink. When you continue with such behavior you end up becoming an alcoholic. You must not indulge such behavior but must remain steadfast, take stock of your life and think of means to take care of your children. If you get drunk and go to bed, who will take care of your children, who will cook and prepare food for the children? You have to understand that the God who created human beings also created death. He added death to the cycle of life. So you must take a look at others and when you realize how the death of someone’s husband led her to drinking then you must decide if you want to follow that pattern. If you decide to indulge in alcohol you must realize you would not be able to care for your children. You have to take some of the burden off your chest. Some people sometimes ask you if you are the only person whose husband has died. Some cases are better than others just like some are worse than others. As I said, I was 35 when my husband passed. For some, it has been 20 years since they were widowed. Some may have just a child, others too may have none. Some could have been pregnant when they lost their husbands. That is how there will be different widow stories. It could also be that one married and had 2 or 3 children and then lost his wife. It is not always the case that husbands die and leave their wives; wives too die and leave their husbands. There are many of such cases.”

A widow from rural AS had a different way of approaching widows. Thinking about support from friends and family, she plans to encourage widows to form groups so that they can encourage
and advise new widows as well as meet and advise themselves. She described that plan by saying:

“When some women lose their partners; they become wayward and do not even take proper care of their children. Others can re-marry and continue with their lives. It is not a good practice to just start to misbehave just because you have lost your husband. If some women do that, their children turn out to be wayward and eventually become bad children. I would urge widows to form social groups so that we can meet and talk to ourselves and advice ourselves. We can also be of great help to new widows. If your husband dies and you want to marry again it must be done in the right way, the Christian way.”

Self-Sufficiency

The ability to survive traumatic incidents depends on many qualities including, the capacity of one to be able to do things that improve quality of life without depending on other people for support.” Two of the widows used their capabilities to be self-sufficient to improve their livelihood and that of their children. One of the widows from urban AS described her experience:

“I have always been living a self-supporting life. My mother died when I was young at the age of 13 and my father also died when I was 17 so I became a mother figure way before I got married. I was taking care of my younger siblings among other responsibilities so in a way I was equipped and knew how not to depend on others. Even through my married life I did not entirely depend on my husband. I remember I once met a friend whose husband had passed away and she told me how she really cried her eyes out one day. When I asked her why, she told me she was home one day when her light bill (electricity bill) was brought to her and she burst into tears. I then asked her why and she told me when her husband was alive he used to pay and take care of all bills. I told her seriously that if it were left with such things as utility bills, I will not necessarily miss my husband because even when he was alive I was already doing things of that nature.”

The other widow also from urban AS described how she employed her self-sufficiency to support her daily needs:

“Physically, I was using my own physical strength even to the extent that I had to make some backyard garden so that I will get some things I will not need to buy in the market. I was using that alongside with my little pay to cater for our needs.”

Discussion

With regards to sources of protection, all participants expressed the factors that aided their continued survival. Sixteen widows reported that their faith and strong belief in God as well as their involvement in church activities had helped in their positive survival. Only 5 of the 20 widows
could report financial stability that had aided in their survival. When support from family, friends and church was strong, it helped widows’ physical, emotional and social survival. Five widows focused on what they themselves could do to improve their livelihood. Pieces of advice these widows offered touched on some important issues in the lives of widows for positive survival from the trauma of widowhood.

In the next chapter I discuss the interpretations of the major themes of the findings as they emerged from the data.
CHAPTER 6
DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to explore, understand and describe the lived experiences and the essence of widowhood for twenty Akan widows in Ghana. The study was designed to focus on the widows’ descriptions and constructions of their experiences, challenges and survival strategies in relation to the loss of their property rights. Generally, participants gave descriptions of the challenges they faced as widows and the resources they employed as protective factors for their ongoing survival. In describing the challenges, every participant gave a vivid description of her experiences of being and living as a widow. Those who went through the widowhood rites described the rituals primarily as traumatic, but some mentioned educative experiences as well.

Many of the widows interviewed described the negative attitudes and behaviors of their in-laws and their confrontations with these in-laws over the properties of their late husbands. Nine of the twenty participants described poor living conditions, especially in the absence of property, the challenges of living in poverty and raising children single-handedly. The widows also described their feelings of loneliness, health problems and issues with the legal systems, both cultural and statutory laws. In describing all those challenging moments in their lives, many widows attributed their continued survival to the grace of God first and foremost. They then described their experiences from their beliefs and relationships with God, their involvement in church activities, and their relationships with other church members. Other protective factors that the widows applied as survival strategies included support from their social networks, economic stability, focusing on what they can do themselves and self supporting initiatives.
Based on the findings from this study, the widows’ experiences and perceptions of widowhood, widowhood rites and property rights can be analyzed in terms of three major conceptual themes. These three main themes emerged as the conditions of widows that created challenges and adjustment difficulties as well as their positive adaptation. The three major themes identified in this study are: Social Location of Akan Women/Widows (in relation to marriage), Risk Factors Confronting Widows and Widows’ Continuous Survival Strategies.

**Social Locations of Akan Women (In relation to marriage)**

The first theme, *Social location* of Akan women, concerns the descriptions from the widows about their perceptions of their daily roles in marriage before they were bereaved. In many societies or cultures including Ghana, there are culturally distinct roles for women and men. There are definitions of what women and men of that society are expected to do, especially during their adult lives. Girls and boys are prepared for their different but specific roles during socialization and they tend to internalize these roles.

**Gender Role Socialization**

Gender-specific role socialization continues to be a contested issue among many cultures. These varied sex role assignments to men and women have been identified and generally accepted to be not biologically determined, but borne out of cultural definitions of sex appropriate behavior (Ampofo, 2001). Gender-specific socialization develops within a context of gender inequalities with the tendency to reinforce the position of male domination over women.

In patriarchal societies such as Ghana, children, especially females, know exactly what their roles are in and out of the home. Through the gender socialization process, girls are trained to take

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*A person’s social location refers to his or her place in society that is formed by the intersection of socially constructed identities that mark privilege and oppression which is essential in capturing the complexity of that person’s experiences, actions, choices and outcome.*
up the domestic (reproductive) roles of performing domestic chores, and to be meek and submissive. Boys are trained to take up fatherly roles and characteristics, such as, masculinity, authority, aggressiveness, power and leadership. Therefore, while girls are kept in the home to perform those domestic duties, boys have the freedom to roam and study their environments. As early as three or four years of age, most Ghanaian children can make conceptual distinctions between the gender roles they are expected to play. These roles continue to impact their adult and married lives.

In responding to the question about their roles as wives before their bereavements, a greater number of the widows started their response with their identity and what is expected of them with this phrase, “as a married woman, I am expected to cook, take care of my husband and children, manage the house…” Most of these widows, from their narratives, were working, either on the farms or in salaried jobs outside the home. Yet, they would come back home after hours of working to perform all those duties, just because they are women and that is expected of them. I argue then that, the processes of gender socialization is basically one of the factors that contribute to women’s social locations and the subsequent inequalities they experience as they go through later in life, including during the culturally gendered widowhood practices.

**Women’s Multiple Roles**

With their “triple” responsibilities of reproduction, production and community engagement, Ghanaian women engage in economic activities to support the household income; spend most of their resources on the care and management of the family and household needs –food, clothing, school fees and other household needs (Brown, 1996); and are responsible for the day-to-day activities in their homes and in their communities, which are basically a reflection and enactment of their socialization roles (Ghanaian women’s daily workload, see Appendix B). The consequences of
these roles are that any other related work that women do is seen as supplementary or secondary (Sossou, 2003). Therefore, some responsibilities such as childcare and caring for elderly family members are seen exclusively as women’s job. In discussing their roles as wives before they were bereaved, each widow talked about caring for the home, including children, the husband, and most often the husband’s relatives, such as step children, nephews and nieces and/or his younger siblings.

**Asymmetrical Obligations and Rights in Akan Cultural Married Life**

Within the traditional Akan home, the man has always been regarded the head of the household and the breadwinner for the family⁹. He is therefore charged with the financial responsibility of looking after the welfare of all the household members. Thus, in view of this responsibility, the man is given the “authoritative power” of control over the necessary economic and other resources such as land, labor and money (Brown, 1996). The husband therefore gains rights to his wife’s (wives’) and children’s domestic labor. And by customary law, it is the domestic responsibility of the wife (wives) and children to support their husband and father in the execution of his duties. Ironically, a husband has no corresponding duty to labor for his wife, but rather a duty to provide her (and children) with economic support. This is very typical among the rural farmers where the husband would give the wife a piece of land to farm on. As evidenced by three of the widows’ reports, a husband would give the wife a piece of land for subsistence farming, growing food crops to feed the people in the house. While wife and children provide labor for the husband’s farm, he might never reciprocate.

These asymmetrical obligations, where the wife has to contribute labor and the husband has to provide economic support in turn justify asymmetrical rights under customary law to property acquired during marriage (Fenrich & Higgins 2001). The consequence of such asymmetrical rights

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⁹ Family under this section refers to the nuclear family.
is that the proceeds of any joint effort of man and wife and/or children, and any property which the
man acquires with such proceeds are by customary law, the individual property of the man. These
asymmetrical rights between husbands and wives in Ghana, especially among the Akans is
enshrined in the traditional saying, “ɔbaa ɔ tuo a etwere ɔbarima dan mu” –literally translated, “if a
woman buys a gun, it is the man who keeps it.” This explains why the widow may not be able to
differentiate her personal income and property from that of the husband. In some typical homes,
although women are more often than not the family’s main source of income, still the men are
perceived as the “providers” (Ghana Demographic & Health survey, 2003). And since by custom
and according to the inheritance rules the property that accrues from the marriage belongs to the
man, the widow stands the chance of losing access to property jointly acquired with her husband.

Sometimes it is not the husband who talks about his sole-ownership of the property, but the
man’s family. Sometimes they know that the woman has contributed to that property, but they
ignore the facts and stick to the cultural and traditional perception. Five widows from this study
joined their husbands and worked with them on their farms for 17, 43, 43, 45 & 26 years,
respectively. When widowed, each of them lost their rights to any portion of their husbands’ farms.
Families of the husbands confiscated the farms by using cultural explanations including that the
men worked on their families’ lands, therefore the farms belong to the families. Another widow,
Gina, lost her rights to a building she and her husband had jointly put up. Her in-laws knew about
her contributions to that building, but during the time for her husband’s funeral, before she got to
the town, her in-laws had changed the locks of the building and were occupying it.

By custom, a husband gains complete and exclusive sexual rights to his wife but not vice-
versa. This explains the customary law’s position on permitting men to have multiple spouses
and/or other sexual relations with other women, termed as “concubines” in which the wife (wives)
have no rights to question or use as grounds for divorce. This situation renders all customary marriages potentially polygamous (Fenrich & Higgins 2001). Such inequalities concerning sexual rights’ extend into reproductive rights. Decision-making about reproduction in terms of child birth is made by the husband to the extent that some husbands decide how many children they want and even the sex of the child or children. In some instances, some men have divorced their wives, married additional wives or engaged in concubinage relationships with the flimsy excuse that their wives have given birth to all boys or girls while they wanted a mixture of the sexes.

Seven of the twenty widows, 3 Muslims and 4 Christians were in polygamous marriage. One Christian widow gave her reasons for marrying a man who already had two wives. She wanted good and better lives for her children, different from what she experienced when her mother deserted them when she was growing up. She therefore wanted a husband who could give her children better living conditions. Therefore she married a businessman with two wives, becoming the third wife. For the three Muslim women, polygamy is part of their practice so there was no problem being married to a polygamous man.

Although the three other Christian widows, Lilly, May and Tina, did not say why they got involved in polygamous relationships or what was their husbands’ motive of marrying them, I deduced possible reasons from their responses. One of them said, “When I married my husband, he already had a first wife, but he was a cocoa farmer, and educated and very hard working.” The second Christian widow said, my husband had a wife who had two boys and when we married I had four girls with him. The third one said, my husband had a wife who was living in Accra engaged in trading and I am working and living in his home town which is far away from that city. Could it be that the widow who married the cocoa farmer was attracted to this hard working educated cocoa farmer? She stressed on his hard work on the farm even though he was educated. The perception in
Ghana is that most farmers are not educated. What about the 2 other Christian widows? One of them reported that her husband had a wife with 3 boys and when we married, “I gave him 4 girls.” Could that confirm what was discussed about husband wanting mixture of the sexes? The 3rd widow stated that her husband already had a wife who stayed and worked in the capital far away from his hometown. She was staying in his hometown and had great relationship with his relatives. So almost every fortnight her husband came home to spend some days with her and the kids. Was that the balance that the man wanted? It is clear that people, men and women, engage in polygamous relationship for various reasons.

Risk/Challenging Factors (Intersectionality)

The death of a husband starts off the widow’s “chain” of challenges. Death remains a great mystery, an undisputable fact in every culture and at every age in human existence. This uncertainty about death evokes in humanity a certain frustration and fear of the unknown as human beings helplessly watch people die, and can neither intervene nor interfere. From the moment of birth (coming from the ancestors) through naming the child, puberty, marriage, death (a journey back to the ancestors), members of the Akan lineage of Ghana pass through different rites and rituals which bind them culturally and spiritually to other members in the lineage (Aborampah, 1999). Death, the last phase of the living within the Akan culture, is characterized with series of rites including the morgue, funeral and widowhood rites.

Widowhood/Widowhood Rites (Kunadie)

Widowhood, the tragic, traumatic and permanent loss of a spouse, is as old as human existence and experience. It is commonly viewed as a life transition, a major change in life circumstances, the last phase and a dreaded time of life for most women. It happens over a relatively short period of time, but has lasting effects on a person’s life. Widowhood begins the very
moment one loses one’s spouse through death. This poignant and devastating life transitional moment is dreaded by many women. Many widows reported running the gamut of emotional confusion of shock, fear, ‘heart attack,’ uncertainty, fury, total motionlessness, etc. For many widows, this transitional moment is the beginning of a permanent life of poverty, lost of status and identity, change in living arrangements and conditions, loneliness, loss of a life partner and a loved one, loss of a breadwinner, etc, till they themselves die (Cattell, 2003). Widowhood poses many challenges, psychological, economic, health, religious and cultural. Psychological challenges include loss, loneliness, heartbreak, confusion and low self-esteem. Economic challenges include loss of the bread winner or co-bread winner and poverty while the health challenges include poor nutrition, inadequate or no shelter, lack of access to health care and vulnerability to violence. Religious challenges include shaken or shattered faith in a loving God, confusion caused by the conflict between Christian faith and practice of some prescribed traditional funeral and widowhood rites and rituals. Cultural challenges include stigmatization, abuse, and ostracization (Ewelukwa, 2002). The situation of any widow is heavily influenced by her life as a wife and the circumstances by which she becomes widowed.

Seven of the widows from this study explained the level of influence of widowhood in terms of good, loving versus bad relationships in marriage. They described how a widowed person’s life could be shattered when one of them dies because of the good and loving lives they had lived as a couple. On the other hand, if there is violence and abuse in the marriage, when the man dies, the widow can experience relief, at least from the violence and therefore might be less shattered or feel some kind of freedom by the husband’s death. These widows’ perceptions about how the level of bereavement is related to the widows’ good or bad experiences in marriage have been confirmed by Bonanno, Wortman, & Nesse (2004). Bonanno, et al, conducted clinical interventions on the
changing lives of bereaved older widows in the U.S. and identified that 10% of their widowed sample who reported high levels of depression when their spouses were living seemed to be functioning well on essentially every index just 18 months after their husbands’ deaths. According to Neimeyer (2006), these widows “might be understood as having been released by bereavement from a... partner in an oppressive marriage... and the death of the spouse, for them, seemed to have opened the door to a long awaited elaboration of new possibilities” (p.242).

The transition to widowhood is a process. In some cultures like the matrilineal Akan in Ghana, widowhood is a long process in which the widow goes through series of rituals and rites (e.g., mourning, morgue, funeral, widowhood, cleansing), which could serve as a healing process or could be detrimental to the already traumatic and devastating life situations of the widows (Aborampah, 1999). This has been confirmed by the findings from this study, where eight of the ten widows who observed the rites reported that it was a painful, stressful, unpleasant and humiliating exercise. However, the remaining two widows learned some positive lessons from it. Differences in experiences of widowhood and widowhood rites depends mostly on the context in which it is occurring, personal conditions, relationships (between widow and husband as well as in-laws) and others as Owen (1996) has argued. In A World of Widows, Margaret Owen, herself a widow, posits that, widowhood is “gendered,” resulting from the fact that many men who lose their wives to death either remarry shortly afterwards or have other wives (Owen, 1996). Cattell (2003) affirms Owens interpretation by stating that “widowhood is socioculturally constructed in that each widow’s life and experience is shaped within that particular sociocultural milieu and widowhood is redefined and elaborated by personal factors like, “the widow’s personality, relationship with in-laws, whether the bridewealth was paid in full, her mourning behavior, her
economic resources, the husband’s status in his family, and her relationship with the husband before he died” (2003, p. 54).

Widows in this study described their experiences of widowhood rites. The type of widowhood rites experienced depends on the widow's and/or the husband’s cultural tradition. According to the 10 widows who participated in the rites, the moment a husband dies the widow’s ordeal starts and if not lucky, (i.e., if in-laws do not like the widow) she is treated as an alien, as somebody else. The first challenge described by the widows is the arrival of a female family member of the husband (referred here as an attendant) who comes to collect the keys to the room that both husband and wife shared and sends the widow to a different place to stay temporarily while plans for the burial arrangements go on. Before the attendant sends her away, she demands that the widow hands over to her the clothes she was wearing at the time of her husband’s death. The widow is escorted back to the room to pick clothes for dressing her husband to be laid in state as well as his burial.

Two or three elderly widows would be guiding the new widow to go through some other specific strict widowhood rites, which include: bathing in cold water three times a day; getting up early in the morning to wail openly in a formalized way to express her feelings for the first 15 days; sleeping in the same room with the corpse till day-break; fasting and/or eating twice a day; avoiding starchy and tuber foods; not handling money; not shaking hands with people; sleeping between people; not going to the cemetery for the burial of her husband (allowed only after the first year anniversary); sleeping with male shoes at the doorstep to ward off the husband’s ghost; wearing black (dress code) for at least one year and wearing no make-up. Throughout the grieving period which could last from 40 days to one year and sometimes beyond, the widow is expected to express her grief through public crying and wearing black clothes.
A case was reported on June 28, 2008, in one of the Ghanaian newspapers, the Daily *Graphic*, about the confinement of 3 widows of the Paramount chief of Mo traditional area for almost 10 years. The custom of the area was that the widows would be released only after the final funeral rites of their husband, who died in April, 1999. Meanwhile, the final funeral rites were to be preceded by the installation of a new paramount chief, which was going through some protracted litigation issues. Therefore those widows, aged 70, 80 and 90, as part of their widowhood rites, remained in confinement for all those years until the news leaked out. It took a public outcry and the then President of Ghana’s intervention for the widows to be released in June 2008 (Ghanaian Daily Graphic, June 2008).

Throughout the developing world, most countries perform widowhood rites as an integral part of the burial and funeral rites and rituals. For instance, Catherine Weinberger-Thomas (2009) recounts the ritual of wife burning on the funeral pyres of her husband known as *the sati*, which has been practiced in certain parts of India since the 1800s. Although this practice was banned in the late 1880s, it resurfaced after India’s independence in 1947. An incidence of sati on a young widow in 1987 caused a nationwide outcry which caused the federal government to take legal actions against its practice (Weinberger-Thomas, 2002). Among the Igbo of Nigeria, Korieh (1996) reports instances where widows have been locked up with the corpse of their husbands for hours, as well as forced to sleep in the grave yard for days after burial with the belief that if they killed their husbands they would also die.

The cultural significance and customary values held about these rituals is related to the beliefs and practices associated with the superstitions about death and dying. The type of death, the social status, the type of marriage contracted, the relationship between husband and wife and that of wife and in-laws before death are also customarily significant. Widowhood practices are therefore
said to be closely tied to traditional beliefs and practices about death, inheritance, family structure and relationships, and expected feminine roles (Sossou, 2002). One widow, Gina who was in a polygamous marriage, described how the two widows were made to go around their husband’s house 12 times in the middle of the night before his funeral celebration. They did that without wearing shoes. The superstitious belief was that if any of the wives killed her husband or were unfaithful to him, that widow would hit her feet against a stone, fall and die.

In discussing widowhood rites the meaning participants attached to their experiences diverged. Most of the widows described the rites as unhelpful; causing additional emotional and stressful experiences; reducing women to something less than human and infringing on their rights. However, two widows described the rites as educative and protective guides for the widow. One of them described how going through the rites she learned about her culture, especially preparing her to stand firm on her feet without the man and move on. The other explained why there is a guide accompanying the widow wherever she goes. She explained that, the essence of the guide is to see to it that the widow does not harm herself in view of the fact that she might be having too many “conflicting” thoughts at that time of the husband’s death. She described how she wished to die when she heard the sudden death of her husband but with the pieces of advice and instructions from the two elderly widows who were guiding her, she was able to survive those traumatic early weeks of bereavement.

**Raising Children**

Unquestionably, the loss of a spouse is one of the most life altering complications a woman can experience. Compounding her grief and overwhelming loss is the situation where the widow has to be managing a home and children who are also bereaved all by herself. A widow caring for children, especially if they are young, is likely to become both sad and anxious (Bowlby, 1980). She
may be preoccupied with her sorrows, in addition to the physical, emotional and other challenges confronting her. It becomes difficult for the widow to give the children as much time and attention as she gave them formerly due to what she herself is going through. Sometimes widows might become impatient and angry when the children claim attention and become whiny when they don’t get it (Bowlby, 1980). Realistically, the truth is, the children are also bereaved (they have lost a dear father) and like their mother are also going through emotional challenges.

There are other challenges widows expressed in raising their children alone. They described how burdensome and demanding it is to provide their children with the best care, especially for health and education. When children are young, in many homes, it is the father who handles educational issues, such as going round to search for schools, buying school items and either paying for the fees or co-paying with the wife. Without the father, the mother handles that alone in addition to her other equally important responsibilities at home. One widow who was bereaved just a month before schools reopened and went searching for schools for her 14 year old son, who was entering senior high school, quoted her son, “Mum, if Dad were alive, you wouldn’t have come this far. You seem tired.”

Most of the widows described additional challenges in raising their children. Much as they are concerned with the welfare and development of the children, financial problems and poverty constrained their efforts. Thus, some of their children have been withdrawn from school after their fathers died. Without money to care for their educational needs, the widows described how they involve their children in religious activities in their churches, hoping that religious and spiritual experiences can keep the children from becoming wayward.
Lack of Property, Property Rights & Poverty

Notwithstanding their vulnerability in dealing with challenges associated with widowhood and widowhood rites including violations of their rights to property (Korieh, 1996), experiences of widows in many developing countries, including Ghana, are aggravated by factors such as violence perpetrated against them, poverty, poor health and lack of education and training. Property rights, (in connection with human/women rights, women’s empowerment and well-being), has been one of the factors drawing many feminists researchers to the field, especially in the developing countries. Roy and Tisdell (2002) articulated, “the concept of property rights has much wider connotation in India [and many developing countries] than in the West” (p.315). This is due to the gender-segregated patterns based on customary laws in relation to access, use and control of landed assets that exist in many developing countries (Roy and Tisdell, 2002; Tinker, 1999; Agarwal, 1997).

Casting a gender perspective analysis on allocation and determinants of tenure administrations to natural resources, Tiwari (2003) argues that the systematic differences in resource tenure rights between men and women contribute to structural inequality and to poverty for women. Tiwari’s argument stems from the fact that natural resource-based assets, land (soils, home sites, crops, grazing and forestland) and water, are very important everywhere but in countries where agriculture dominates, ownership of these resources is politically significant and directly associated with power. Rights to use and control land is central to the lives of women, especially rural women in countries where the main sources of income and livelihood are derived from these natural resources. Therefore, lack of direct access to these resources and control over their use (which form the basis for food and income production) may place limitations on women’s productive roles as well as their power and influence in the household and the community at large (Tiwari, 2003; Tinker and Summerfield, 1999). Tiwari (2003) therefore posits that,
Property rights include far more than titles and pieces of paper specifying ‘ownership’ of a defined piece of land or other resources. They encompass a diverse set of tenure rules and multi-dimensional aspect of access to and use of resources. (p.1)

Economic security is a major concern for most African widows. Apart from being denied access to land and other property, their access to capital, credit, employment and other means of livelihood are also restricted by poverty. Access to land, that is having the rights to own, manage or control the land at will, is also access to food security and an opportunity for access to capital and credit (Summerfield, 2006; Agarwal, 1997). The widows’ lack of rights to these resources to serve as collateral impedes their chances of entering the market economy (Summerfield, 2006). The five widowed farmers who lost their rights to any part of the farms after being widowed described how their poor state of living has impacted their welfare and development. They had wasted their youthful energies in farming with their husbands and now in their 60’s, they are not strong enough to start new farms and do not have any landed property and source of income. Owen, (2000) sums it all up as, “widows’ poverty is directly related to a lack of access to economic resources, including credit, land ownership and inheritance, a lack of access to education and support services, and their marginalization and exclusion from the decision-making process” (p.12).

Stories from this field study with widows in Ghana confirm that living without access to land contributes a great deal to poverty. Without land for farming, these widows have to buy food and everything for their families’ daily needs, but they are not “working” (employed) and therefore are not earning any income. Due to poverty some widows are forced to withdraw their children from school, the consequences of which impact the whole family and the community at large. Poverty among widows has been found to be not only “the developing countries’ phenomenon” but a common situation for widows in developed countries as well. Using data from the longitudinal
study, *The 1992 to 1998 waves of the Health and Retirement Study* in the U.S., Sevak, Weir and Willis (2003/04) found that widowhood increases the incidence of poverty among women who were not poor during their marriages times and that women who are widowed at younger ages are at greatest risk for economic hardship after widowhood.

One of the widows' major concerns is about their welfare, health and that of their children. As soon as they get sick, widows become anxious about their children as well. These findings from the field are confirmed by Bowlby (1980), that a widow becomes constantly anxious about her health and visits the doctor as much as to obtain his support as for her children’s treatment.

Although Bowlby was writing about Western widows and their children in a different context and time frame, there are similar instances from the findings of this study. Lucy, a widow with nine children, worried a great deal about these children’s future, including who would care for them when she is dead. She said, she had a health condition before her husband died and so she prays to God to protect her not to be sick. She fears she will die and leave them orphans without a caretaker.

**Single Life/Loneliness**

Seven of the twenty widows from this study described how their feeling of loneliness is gradually affecting their lives. They feel some kind of emptiness in their hearts. They reported that these feelings become apparent when they need someone to share an intimate issue with and cannot find anyone. As one of them puts it, “even your best friend would not have time to listen to you. And sometimes too, you need to share certain issues with someone very intimate but you cannot get any.” They reported that sometimes they become disinterested in engaging in any social activities. Most of the time, when they are alone in their rooms, thoughts of how they used to share issues with their husbands pops up and all they could do is to cry their hearts out and sleep till day break. When
that happens, they only have to pray so that they would have consolation from God to get back and continue their daily chores.

The feeling of loneliness, according to West, Kellner and Moore-West (1986), is not just being physically isolated (which could be aloneness) but being without some definite needed relationship or set of relationships; having an exceedingly unpleasant experience connected with inadequate discharge of the need for human intimacy, for interpersonal intimacy. Loneliness, the emotional isolation is the subjective experience of feeling lonely, an emptiness. It is defined as an individual’s subjective experience of a lack of satisfying human relationships. Loneliness in widows is very devastating. It is more than the feeling of wanting company or wanting to do something with another person. Loneliness is related to several characteristics that impair the quality of life of widows and, like depressive symptoms and decreased subjective health, may lead to cognitive decline, increased need of help and use of health services (Nalungwe, 2009). Generally, lonely people often experience a subjective sense of inner emptiness or hollowness, with feelings of separation or isolation from the world. Johnson and Mullins (1989) suggest that for those who are highly religious, the subjective feelings of having a personal relationship with God that can be nourished through prayer may even help compensate for the lack of human companionship. The researchers continue that such loneliness may be resolved by one’s spiritual beliefs or by such practices as prayer or Bible reading (Johnson and Mullins, 1989).

**Poor Health Issues**

Among the 30 Universal Declaration Articles that the United Nations adopted and proclaimed on December 10, 1948 is the one that makes specific reference to health; “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of
livelihood in circumstances beyond his control” (Preamble, Article 25(1), p.1). The concept of health as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 1948 is, “a state of complete physical, mental and social well being and not merely the absence of disease and infirmity” (Official Records WHO, p. 100). The consequences of Ghanaian widows’ lack of access to land, capital, shelter, education and resources are numerous and include lack of adequate food and good nutrition, lack of enough sleep and rest, and lack of financial support to pay for health expenses. The results may be widows’ poor physical, psychological, moral, and social health (Sossou, 2002).

Lack of Education and Training

The high rate of illiteracy among women (mostly widows) also complicates the widows’ ability to read and understand the provisions in the PNDC Laws 111 & 112 as well as their rights. Lack of education, where one can read and/or write at least in one’s own language, impacts most aspects of human knowledge about rights (legal rights, especially). It also impacts negatively on the widows’ ability to get a job outside the home and attend to children’s educational needs. These disadvantaged, vulnerable situations complicate and limit many widows’ access to a lot of resources. Most widows from this study entertain the fear of seeking legal and economic help for their situations because of their vulnerability of being illiterate and poor.

Legal Challenges

Compounding the widows’ plight is the complexities of Ghana’s pluralistic legal system, which fails to protect and support the rights and dignity of the vulnerable.

Customary Law

Ruling side-by-side with the statutory law of Ghana, customary law regulates the institution of marriage and related issues such as family, divorce, widowhood and inheritance as well as land
use, land tenure, land ownership and related issues (Akufo-Addo, 2002). Customary law is a body of unwritten rules concerning acceptable standards of behavior governing personal status, social organizations and communal resources in many parts of the developing world, including Ghana.

Stipulations analyzed in the *Fanti Customary Laws* by Mensah Sarbah (1904) in connection with rules and principles governing issues dealing with interrelationships in marriage, land tenure, property, property rights and laws governing succession and inheritance have not seen major change in their structure and application. The customary law is clear about types of properties and how to deal with each. For instance, in his *Fanti Customary Laws*, Mensah Sarbah (1904) divided property into “moveable and immovable” and further sub-divided these into “ancestral,” “family” and “self-acquired.” Ancestral property includes property left by an ancestor, which could be moveable (gold rings, stool, etc.) or immovable (land, building, etc). Family property is defined as property or item(s) purchased by the general contribution from family members and includes moveable and immovable items. Self-acquired refers to property that a person purchases or gains by his individual efforts.

A person who inherits an ancestral or family property cannot bequeath these properties to anyone without the collective decision by the family. For self-acquired property, a person can give as a gift to anyone he wishes (e.g. give a house to wife and children as a gift) while he is alive or can will it to anyone. But if the person dies intestate, any self-acquired property of his will go through the inheritance procedure, but not to his wife or his children since they are considered as outsiders to the inheritance group (Mensah Sarbah, 1904).

This self-acquired property issue is very problematic and poses a lot of challenges for many widows, especially those in the matrilineal lineage where inheritance does not include children. Many wives are working and contributing financially to programs and projects in the house. One
widow, Agnes, from rural AS described how through their joint contributions, she and her husband were able to build a house, started another one and had some plots for their children’s future living. After her husband died, her in-laws evicted her from the completed house to the incomplete one where she had to look for loans to complete building. The in-laws took the other two plots from her. She is still struggling with the pains and hurts the in-laws caused her. Because of this her children cannot continue to college, because the loan she got was used to complete their building and she cannot get another loan readily until she pays off the first loan.

**Provisional National Defense Council (PNDC) Law 111, 1985**

The law of intestate has been in existence for over one hundred years, and has gone through several evolutions, but legislative changes were not made until 1985. When the Ghana Law Reform Commission was established in 1968 and statutory and customary laws were renewed, inheritance and marriage laws were among the first identified as requiring attention and reforms. This resulted in some law reforms, like the *Maintenance of Children Decree, 1977* and the *Intestate Succession Law, 1985*. Policies governing women’s rights to property have evolved over the years from the statutes or English common law and the customary laws to the Intestate Succession Law (PNDCL 111, 1985).

The purpose of the PNDCL111 (1985), as stated in the memorandum, is *to remove the irregularities in the law relating to intestate succession by providing uniform succession law to be applied throughout Ghana, irrespective of the intestate’s class and type of marriage*. Provisions in this law which came into effect in 1985 make it possible for children, both sons and daughters, as well as wives to inherit the self-acquired property of the deceased husband who died intestate. For instance, section 3 of the law specifies that the spouse and child are entitled absolutely to the household chattels of the intestate while section 4 states that if the intestate had only one house, that
should go to the spouse and child. Realizing some omissions and flaws in the law, the government made some amendments in 1991 as Interstate Succession (Amendment) Law (PNDCL 264, 1991).

**Customary Marriage and Divorce (Registration) Law (PNDCL 112, 1985)**

The Customary Marriage and Divorce (Registration) Law (PNDCL 112, 1985) seeks all marriages contracted under the customary law before and after the commencement of the law to be registered in accordance with the provisions of the law. Section 3, article 1 of PNDCL 112, (1985) requires the application for registration of the marriage to include: a) Names of the parties to the marriage; b) The places of residence of the parties at the time of the marriage; and c) The conditions essential to the validity of the marriage in accordance with the applicable customary law that have been complied with. Sections 14 and 14b deal with sanctions for offenders. In 1991, the Law was amended (*PNDCL 263, 1991*) to include deadlines for customary marriage registration and support for widows whose marriages had been registered.

The intent of this law was to get all marriages in Ghana registered not just those in Christian and Mohammedan systems. Therefore, L112 was to get every marriage in Ghana registered in order to identify widowed people. That information could also have been used to help widows on cases of property rights. But, when men have two or more wives, which of them do they choose to register with? The same goes with Muslims with many wives. Therefore many men refuse to register their marriages. One other reason why this registration of marriages has low response is time and distance. Those in the villages are to come to the courts in town to do that, which they think it is time consuming to do as farmer when they need that time for their farms,

**Structure, Interpretation and Administration of PNDC Laws 111 & 112 - Problems**

In its present form, Law 111 has improved the lives of some women in Ghana by
providing for spousal rights in intestate succession, which was entirely absent under customary law (Fenrich & Higgins 2002). Nevertheless, twenty-six years since its adoption, a number of problems still persist while others have emerged.

The structure of Ghanaian family systems under the customary law has not seen much change because customary law as part of the dual legal system of governance in Ghana, controls matters regarding marriage, divorce, property rights, inheritance and succession. With all these social and cultural institutions under its control and governance many widows, especially those in the rural areas succumb to the orders of the customary laws. This is because most of them lack the knowledge, understanding and resources to enforce the provisions in PNDCL 111. The reality is, even if the law is well-understood, the persistence of longstanding expectations and social practices informed by the customary law of intestate succession has given rise to many problems in enforcing the statute (Fenrich & Higgins 2001). Contrary to the customary distribution of self-acquired property of the intestate, the statute overlooks the customary law and distributes the property to the wife and child, an action which creates or has created tensions between families.

One of the major inadequacies of the PNDC Law111 which poses problems in connection with women’s rights to property is its failure to explicitly address polygyny and its resultant consequences for women who may be one of several widows with claims on the deceased spouse’s estate. This problem becomes more complicated in situations where children are born outside the marriage (sometimes without the knowledge of the wives) and who by the provisions of this law have rights to their father’s property. Polygyny, under the provisions of the law raises serious issues of gender inequality because, whereas a man can have multiple wives and can inherit from all of them, a number of wives can inherit from only one deceased husband. This contradicts the intent of
the statute that is, to recognize the economic contribution of wives to the value of their husband’s estate. Ironically, Law111 is silent about this “controversial” issue.

Polygyny also raises questions about registration of marriages and divorces. In Customary and the Mohammedan’s ordinance marriages, all of which are potentially polygamous, marriage registration is very limited. Men are refusing to register their marriages and still prefer their indigenous way of succession and inheritance. High rates of illiteracy and poverty renders women, especially widows “handicapped” in their knowledge and understanding of the provisions laid out in the statute as well as their access to resources like legal assistance.

Widows’ Continuous Survival Strategies

The extent to which the widow becomes resilient depends on the nature of resources drawn from the social networks within the family, community and religious organization to which she is a member (social capital); her own personal attributes (educated/uneducated, self-confidence, income level, spirituality, etc.); and the type of customary laws governing marriage, property & inheritance within the specific community to which she and/or the husband belong.

The inevitable and unexpected loss of a loved one to death evokes intensive and overwhelmingly traumatic experiences which often result in behavioral and emotional challenges for the bereaved persons (Stroebe, Hansson, Stroebe & Schut, 2001; Bonanno, Papa & O’Neill, 2002). Conjugal bereavement typically has tremendous impact on the widows’ daily living activities, worsens their health conditions and sometimes they suffer social isolation. These physical and psychosocial effects can sometimes extend for many years depending on some sociodemographic characteristics like, age, status of the dead, religion and the relationships in the marriage before death (Morycz, 1992). This is due not only to the feelings and emotional impacts related to grief but also to adaptations to new role transitions, social support, reflections and feelings
about one’s own death, especially in older widows (Morycz, 1992). There are individual variations when it comes to how widows respond to grief and recover from grief. Ability for an individual to survive through grief and other related situations depends much on the presence of protective factors.

Well-Being and Functioning (capability approach)

The concept of human well-being, is multifaceted and lacks a universally acceptable definition. It has numerous and often competing interpretations. Since human well-being cannot be directly observed, it cannot be directly measured as well and therefore certain terms are used in its stead. Such terms as quality of life, welfare, well living, living standards, utility, life satisfaction, needs fulfillment, development, empowerment, capability expansion and happiness are often used by researchers, policy-makers, development economists and social scientists without explicit discussion as to their distinctiveness (McGillivray and Clarke, 2007).

From his capability approach (CA) framework, Sen (1993) explains that, “well-being achievement of a person can be seen as an evaluation of the wellness of the person’s state of being” (p.36), that is to say, assessing the constituent elements (the functionings) of the person from the perspective of his or her own personal welfare. The approach therefore “is based on a view of living as a combination of various ‘doings and beings’ with quality of life to be assessed in terms of the capability to achieve valuable functions” (Sen, 1993, p.31).

Five widows from this study have made some positive strides towards well-being and functioning. These widows, 2 from urban AS, 2 from urban BA and one from rural BA, have taken it upon themselves to educate other ‘vulnerable widows on issues of self–support, religious/spirituality activities, assertiveness and income-generating activities to care for their children and provide them with exemplary role models. They sometimes give financial and
material support to other vulnerable widows. When I asked why and how they took that initiative, one of them said, “I was doing that, visiting and talking to widows long before I became one.” Another widow said she heard from people that some widows after their husbands die and have no means of funding, take to prostitution to get money. So she decided to talk to them, encourage them to stand up and do something positive for themselves rather than to become involved in such unhealthy activities. Now, groups, churches and communities call on her to talk to new widows. In addition to the educative projects they have embarked upon, they are working in other economic activities, taking care of their families and moving on with their lives, validating these core principles of functioning and capabilities.

Freedom to enable one to lead different types of valued life, according to Sen (1993), is reflected in the person’s capability set and the capability of a person depends on variety of factors, including personal characteristics and social arrangements. Sen adopted and limited his reference to examples of functionings and capabilities at the “very elementary” and “basic” levels to include: being adequately well nourished, well sheltered, educated, acquiring knowledge, being in good health, achieving self-respect, being socially integrated, having the capacity to escape avoidable morbidity and premature death (Sen, 1993).

Martha Nussbaum is another strong proponent of CA. Central to Nussbaum’s liberal conception of justice and human rights (her version of Sen’s concept of freedom and capabilities) is her argument that capabilities, as listed by her, should be “pursued for each and every person, treating each as end and none as a mere tool to the ends of others,” with special reference to “women as having too often been treated as the supporters of the ends to others, rather than as ends in their own rights” (pp.5-6). Her liberal views then are compatible with the feminist affirmation of the value of women as persons (Garrett, 2008). The capability approach, as developed by Sen and
Nussbaum, presents an important framework for understanding human development from the perspectives of human well-being.

**Religiosity/Spirituality**

Koenig, McCullough and Larson (2001) define religion as,

*An organized system of beliefs, practices, rituals and symbols designed to facilitate closeness to the sacred or transcendent (God, higher power or ultimate truth/reality); and to foster understanding of one’s relationship and responsibility to others in living together in a community.* (p. 18)

In conceptualizing the concepts of religion and spirituality, Koenig, et al, identified specific characteristics distinctively separating spirituality from religion. The main difference relates to the individualistic nature of spirituality and the community focused nature of religion. “*Spirituality*” is therefore defined as,

*The personal quest for understanding answers to questions about life, about meaning and about relationships to the sacred or transcendent, which may (or may not) lead to or arise from the development of religious rituals and formation of community.* (p.18)

According to Neill and Kahn (1999), researchers have distinguished between personal spirituality (intrinsic religiosity) and religious social activities (extrinsic religiosity). While intrinsic religiosity includes private activities such as praying, meditating, Bible reading and personal beliefs in God, extrinsic religiosity comprises attendance at church meetings and services, volunteer activities associated with religion and other religious activities involving two or more people.

From their descriptions of religious/spiritual activities as protective factors for continuous surviving, many of the widows in this study, especially the Christians, talked about their strong beliefs in God, using prayer and fasting as their spiritual weapon, attending church services and prayer/group meetings, getting involved in church activities as well as volunteering to help other
vulnerable people, especially widows. These activities they undertook and continue to do really show how they combine both intrinsic and extrinsic religious activities for survival.

Engaging more in personal spirituality enables widows to seek for meaning in their predicament, death and their own existence. They sought the meaning of death and at the same time put their trust in God as He is the “All-Knowing.” They know their existence depends on God, as most of them said, “It is only by God’s grace that I am alive.” Through their personal encounter with God, as they reported, most of them have come to understand that, *the God who created human beings also created death. Therefore, death is natural and that each person is going to go through. It is not that God hates them.* They believe that God moves with them wherever they go and that He watches over them. Through prayer, they are able to communicate with God and He helps them to handle whatever challenges confronting them, in addition to helping them understand their purpose in life. All these activities, as they reported, help them in their process of coping.

Widows' reports of religion/spirituality as a coping mechanism is consistent with other research. Emerging evidence from studies linking widowhood, religiousness/spirituality and well-being suggest that religious involvement can have valuable effects on the widowed, especially during their bereavement (Roff, Durkin, Sun & Klemmack, 2007). Similarly, Walsh, King, Jones, Tookman & Blizard, (2002), found from their study of widowed persons that spirituality/religious beliefs and practices facilitate grief solution. Michael, Crowther, Schmid & Allen (2003) posits that, religious activities can aid the widowed in meaning construction, finding social support and maintaining a bond to the deceased by seeing him or her as existing in an afterlife. This conception of how religious/spiritual activities can enhance well-being is consistent with the modified theoretical model of coping process proposed by Folkman (1997). His model suggests that using
meaning-based processes (including experiencing positive events and activating spiritual resources) can help individuals cope with ongoing stressors, leading to more positive emotions and well-being.

**Social Capital/Networks (Supportive Family & Friends)**

The role of social support is a significant aspect in the lives of the widows. One strong cultural value of Ghanaians is the interconnectedness within the family system, including the extended family. Admittedly, due to factors such as urbanization, education and career responsibilities, this rich value is diminishing, but not when someone is bereaved. Strong peer, family and communal support is an important resource for the widow. At the time of bereavement, when the widow is at her low level of vulnerability, she would definitely need support from family, friends, church members and the community as a whole.

Widows in this study gave incredible accounts of the support they got and continue to get from their social networks. Widows described the type of support they received, especially at the time of their bereavement, including from family members, especially their mothers and older children, friends, church members and pastors, and people from the communities. Most of the people who visited would help out in different ways. Some would be helping take care of the children while some would be guiding (teaching) her to know what to do and what not to do.

Socialization is a continuous process in human development. The widow needs to learn the life’s tasks for that stage of her life as a widow. Several authors have also found that socialization with friends or relatives, volunteering, good nutrition and exercise contribute to successful or positive coping. It is through the process of such socialization, guiding the widow to know what to do or not to do, that some people (especially female-in-laws) mis-handle the widow.

Social capital is an important concept in social sciences as well as in the discussion agendas of human development and policy programs (Barr & Russell, 2006; Rose, 1999). Due to the
complexities of social capital, the concept lends itself to multi-dimensional definitions, interpretations and uses (Feldman and Assaf, 1999). Robert Putnam (1993) defines social capital as, *those features of social organization, such as networks of individuals or households, and the associated norms and values that create externalities for the community as a whole*” (as quoted by Grootaert and Bastlaer, 2002, p.2).

From the perspective of a social worker, the nature, structure and the tenets of social capital could also be viewed from the *ecological systems theory*, developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner in 1979. Ecological systems theory uses four different types of surroundings and relationships (networks/systems) of a person to help explain his/her development. The micro and meso systems (informal social networks) provide understanding of the face-to-face interactions and relationships within the immediate environment with bi-directional influence within and between the systems, which does not necessarily need written legal laws or rules, but mutual service for help within and among individuals or groups (Rose (1999). The exo and macro systems concern the formalized structures (formal social networks) with a variety of influences –laws, customs, resources and has organized forms of membership. Social workers, sociologists, psychologists and others in the human service professions use this framework as an approach to their professional practice with vulnerable clients such as widows.

In chapter 7, I discuss the implications of the study findings for Ghanaian policy evaluation and administration, social work policy and practice and feminist/women studies and advocacy.
CHAPTER 7
CONCLUSION

This qualitative, phenomenological study furthers understanding of the widows’ experiences of widowhood, widowhood rites as well as the violations of their rights to the property they had been part of until the deaths of their husbands. In this study, protective sources such as religious/spirituality, social capital/networks, economic stability and personal characteristics of independence enhanced widows’ process of coping. Application of these protective resources translates into better functioning and well-being. Although, there are limitations of this study, its findings have implications for policy and practice.

Implications for Policy

It is important to contextualize the issues raised by this study in the larger socio-cultural, socioeconomic and socio-political terms. Violations of widows’ rights to property persist. Poverty, poor health and mistreatment of widows in the name of customary laws are striking. In-laws’ property grabbing exist. To most children, losing their fathers to death means the end of their education. This is because many widowed mothers do not have any landed property, no source of income and therefore cannot support their children with their necessary developmental needs, including education and health.

The Intestate Succession Law, 1985 (P.N.D.C. Law 111) was designed to eliminate all forms of gender discrimination in the distribution of property upon intestacy by granting equal rights of succession to widows and all children of the intestate, irrespective of gender or age as enshrined in the Constitution of Ghana, article 22. This law takes into account the contemporary conceptualization of the family –the nuclear family in Ghana as well the wife’s role and contribution to the husband’s economic activity, which the customary law fails to acknowledge. However, after
26 years of operation, there has been identification of some limitations and problems that tend to worsen widows’ problems rather than improving them.

Despite its enforcement and the various statutory sanctions that accompany the various provisions in the law for offenders, there is a prevalence of abuses of Law 111. Findings from this study recorded some widow abuses such as eviction from matrimonial home, confiscation of farms in the name of customary laws after working on the land with the husband for 42 years. Other instances of widow-abuse include physical, verbal and psychological abuses by in-laws (mother-in-law, brother/sister-in-law & nephew/niece-in-law) over her husband’s property. In addition, the Customary Marriage and Divorce (Registration) Law 112, 1985 has not been adhered to by many Ghanaians. In some communities the Law is completely disregarded and intestate estates continue to be distributed according to the prevailing customary laws on intestate succession.

PNDC Law 111 is supposed to govern widows’ rights to property but its impact in achieving and enhancing women’s position in this regards has been limited by a number of factors. Widows ability to enforce their inheritance rights under the Intestate Succession Law has been hampered by factors such as high levels of illiteracy and ignorance of the law, poverty, interference by extended family, fear of being accused or ostracized, fear of severing relationships between their children and the children’s paternal group, as well as limitations in access to justice. These are indications of how the Law is failing Ghanaian widows due to the limitations and problems of accessing the provisions in the laws.

Issues raised by this study are from the widows who are experiencing these abuses on the ground. They are serious and call for public awareness and a consensus effort of all to eliminate these abuses against widows. Although it is women who bear the burden of this gendered customary laws, research has it that gender inequalities have a negative impact on the nations that perpetuate it,
affecting not only women and their daughters, but everybody including men and boys (King and Mason, 2001). Thus, ignoring gender disparities comes at great cost – to people’s well-being and to countries’ abilities to grow sustainably, to govern effectively and thus to reduce poverty (James D. Wolfensohn, President of The World Bank, 2001).

Article 270(1) of the constitution of Ghana recognizes and guarantees the institution of chieftaincy, together with its traditional councils as established by customary law. In the same vein, Article 272 states that the National House of Chiefs shall undertake progressive study and codification of customary law to establish unified rules and evaluate traditional customs and such laws with aim of "eliminating those customs and usages that are outmoded and socially harmful" (Constitution of the Republic of Ghana, 1992, p.165). There are more than 100 ethnic groups in Ghana and this varied nature of the cultural, ethnic and linguistic composition of the various communities means that the customary laws differ significantly from community to community. This poses serious challenges to policy-makers bent on developing the institutions of the modern state among a population that is so ethnically diverse and largely illiterate (Akufo-Addo, 2002). Therefore, any attempt to effective change within the customary law has to grapple with the greatest weaknesses of the customary law system; that is, the absence of marriage registration and the customary conveyances of interest in land to address the exploitation of the legally disadvantaged, women, the poor and the illiterate (Akufo-Addo, 2002). These are the obvious problems and tensions emanating from the plural legal system.

The customary law system in Ghana needs a great overhauling. Some issues raised from this study about the Akan customs include reviewing (overhauling) the customary practices. All practices that are detrimental to human, especially women’s well-being and development, should be deleted. In their description of widowhood rites, some participants even acknowledged some
educative lessons from them. However, many of the customs inherited from our ancestors are outmoded and dangerous to practice in this 21st century time. Akans as a people have been able to stop or change Bragor (puberty rites celebration for girls) the way it used to be, where girls were shown in public half naked. Treating widows as outsiders have gained some positive strides and now there is the understanding and appreciation of the wife’s role and contributions to her husband’s economic activities within the nuclear family. On the other hand, widowhood rites, which are gendered, painful, humiliating activities that are detrimental to the widows’ well-being and development, still persist in many Akan communities. They pose physical, psychological and spiritual challenges to the widows. Issues and questions raised by the widows who participated in this study, in connection with their experiences, call for more inquiries into the realities of Akan widows’ lives.

In his discussions about “the challenge to change, Chambers (1997) posits that, “Much that happens on a vast scale is neither accountable nor under effective control... in conditions of continuous and accelerating change, put people first and poor people first of all to enable sustainable well-being of all” (pp.12 & 14). There is therefore, an urgent need for collaboration between the government, the local authorities (chiefs, queenmothers, malams, magageers, town councils, family heads, etc), the academicians (university researchers and practitioners) and the women & feminists groups for implementing workable, practicable policies which can bring changes to the lives of all people, especially women/widows. This could be done systematically from the National House of Chiefs (representing all the Regions), the Regional House of Chiefs (representing all the Districts) and continue to heads of families. It is a well known fact that in Ghana the respect and dignity held and accorded to chiefs, queenmothers, etc and the impact they

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10 Malams are male leaders and Magageers are female leaders in Islamic communities.
make on the people in matters relating to customary issues far exceed the impact a policy from “above” can make. After all, the customary law rules side-by-side with statutory law. Changes in long-held traditional practices might not be fully achieved solely by passing a law but in collaboration with the people. Research studies by the universities and feminist groups could inform the government about the outmoded and socially harmful customary practices. Therefore, any positive change to the “outmoded and socially harmful” customary laws, as prescribed in the constitution would enhance women/widows’ access to the provisions in the Intestate Succession Law (PNDCL 111, 1985), as well as the development of the country as a whole.

**Implications for Practice**

The findings from this study and the issues raised by participants have important implications for social workers, feminist groups, advocates and all professionals working with women, especially widows. Given the evidence concerning the risks confronting widows, their social location as women and widowed, as well as the significant influence of the protective factors on their well-being, practitioners would be informed and more open to working with these clients.

Social work, as a profession has historically emphasized a holistic view for understanding the depth and breadth of the client, *individual, family, community or system in the context of its biological, psychological, social, historical, environmental and cultural experiences* (Murphy, et al, 2009, p.1). Social workers therefore draw on their knowledge, values, and skills to help people in need and address issues that affect the poor, the oppressed and the marginalized. Although social work could be termed as “*an international or global profession,*” its professionalism is young and weak in many areas of the world, especially in developing countries like Ghana.

People’s identities and lived experiences, especially that of women in these countries, have been the consequences of the intersection of the sociocultural ideologies and political structures that
have evolved from the countries’ historical trajectories. Such experiences coupled with “stratified” power relations between the genders, continue to impact negatively women’s rights and opportunities to access resources such as education, food/nutrition and economic support. Consequently, people, especially women and their children, continue to struggle with poverty, discrimination, illiteracy, oppression, deprivation and marginalization. In reference to the findings of this study, although a quarter of the widows (5) could be said to be well-functioning and have moved on with their lives, 8 of the remaining 15 are still struggling to make ends meet. They don’t have any source of income or property, and their children are withdrawn from school, etc. Clearly, there is more work to be done.

The social work profession has experienced tremendous transformation in relation to the inclusion of diversity in its knowledge base, policy and practice (Murphy, et al., 2009). Thus, social workers seek to be culturally competent in order to understand the worldviews as well as lived experiences of the people they serve. As social change agents, social workers need this understanding which is a vital tool for effective interaction with the marginalized populations they work with as researchers, evaluators and practitioners. The foundation of the social work profession includes a body of knowledge built from its own firm and growing body of research and also from other disciplines that focus on understanding people’s needs and behavior (Kirst-Ashman, 2007). Feminist researchers, for instance, have transformed how gender is discussed and understood in the context of power relations embedded in social identities through the process of intersectionality (Collins, 2000; Shields, 2008). Social workers and feminists have a lot in common as both are viewed as “female” disciplines in terms of the number of their clientele and their professionals. There is therefore a strong need for collaboration between the two for more understanding and effective study and practice with women, children and families across the globe.
Feminists focusing on intersectionality challenge our thinking about women’s experience and identities as multidimensional, shifting, and layered across systems and time (Samuels and Ross-Sheriff, 2008; Collins, 2000). Intersectional paradigms, according to Collins (2000), suggest that:

*Certain ideas and/or practices surface repeatedly across multiple systems of oppression. Serving as focal points for intersecting system of oppression, these ideas and practices may be central to how gender, sexuality, race, class and nation mutually construct one another.* (pp. 47-48)

The intersectionality perspective helps the understanding of the individual’s social identities which profoundly influence one’s beliefs about and experience of gender. Therefore, feminist researchers have come to understand that the individual’s social location as reflected in intersecting identities must be at the forefront in any investigation of gender (Shields, 2008, p. 301). For example, to understand the extent of the impact of bereavement and widowhood on widows in Ghana, and in the developing world in general, it is necessary to conduct an intersectional, comparative study of widowhood (both widows and widowers), their situations, the different gendered socially constructed identities, impact of bereavement, percentage of the population they comprise, educational levels, occupation, lineage, type of marriage they contracted, social class, gendered socialization patterns, etc, as well as people’s perceptions of widows and widowers.

The feminist way of understanding and explaining female “*personal*” experience is based on the concept of “*the personal is political.*” This is a method that feminists apply for “gleaning political insights from an analysis of personal experience, in particular, female experience” (Collins, 1986, p. 215). In feminist terms, the “*the personal is political*” refers to a theory that personal problems are political problems, which basically means that many of the personal problems women experience in their lives are not their fault, but are the result of systematic oppression. It is also through consciousness-raising, that women’s similar experiences can be identified and women can
individually and collectively take back their power to decide what is best for them regardless of what political institutions expect of them. The personal really is political and the importance of recognizing this for women all over the world calls for a strong teamwork of researchers, practitioners, advocates for policy and legislative changes, etc, from social work, gender & women studies, and other disciplines that focus on women’s freedom and well-being. Such a focus is enshrined in how the IFSW\textsuperscript{11} has redefined social work from the global professional perspective as a profession that promotes social change, human rights, social justice, problem solving in human relationships and that empowers and liberates people to enhance their well-being (IFSW, 2001).

Social workers’ believe in the inherent dignity and worth of the person is based on the premise that individuals have the right to develop fully and freely their inherent human potentials and to live productive and satisfying lives free from domination and exploitation. There is the need to include the voices of social work practitioners with policy practice skills, not just rely on the “purview of policy experts” (Rocha, 2007). Rocha (2007) defines policy practice as; “\textit{a change approach that uses advocacy and community practice techniques to change programs and policies at multiple systems levels, targeting communities, local, federal…and the courts}” (p.1). Policy practice, according to Rocha (2007), encompasses all of the work that social workers do trying to change systems for the betterment of their clients, neighborhoods and communities. The code of ethics is quite clear on social workers’ responsibilities as professionals to perform policy practice activities, engage in social and political change efforts, advocate for changes in policy and legislation to improve social conditions and social justice for all people (NASW, 1999, section 6.04a).

\textsuperscript{11} The International Federation of Social Workers
James Midgely (1996) argues that adopting a global perspective in social work provides an opportunity for social workers to expand their theoretical and practical knowledge, and thus increase international collaboration and strengthen the profession’s ability to respond to social problems at the national and international levels. Social work practice in the United States is increasingly embracing more international perspectives as practitioners are confronted with people from other countries with different needs and very few resources. There is the need to train social workers with cross-cultural perspectives, policy practical skills and multicultural competences which could potentially help them become aware and understand their clients as well as their own country’s cultural belief systems, values and how sociocultural ideologies and political structures construct and impact on the poor and marginalized.

**Study Strengths and Limitations**

This qualitative phenomenological study employed an open-ended, interactive conversational approach to explore Akan widows’ contextual descriptions and meaning-making of their lived experiences in relation to widowhood, widowhood rites and violations of their property rights. This method offers an effective way of capturing the essence of the lived experiences of these widows. Through phenomenology, I was able to uncover those unheard voices and gain a richer understanding of their unique individual experiences.

The maximum variation sampling technique represented varying voices aimed at *thick description* to strengthen the quality of the data collected. I deliberately applied this ‘special’ purposive sampling to interview a varied selection of people. The semi-structured, open-ended interview guide and the interactive conversational approach to the interviewing process within their own homes offered the widows an opportunity to talk and express themselves in very comfortable conditions.
Being a native with knowledge of the language and culture made it easy to build rapport with all participants. I captured the interview both on video and audio to strengthen my transcription and data analysis. I transcribed first into the native language, Twi, before translating into English. I did that to capture the themes exactly as they meant it so that I could better interpret their meanings.

However, since there is no “perfect” human endeavor, limitations of this study include time, the method and my own limitations. I used a single method, interviewing, which might be limited by participants’ insights, ability to remember and articulate their experiences and social desirability. While some participants were widowed for only 2 weeks at the time of interview, some had been widowed for 10 years. For multidimensional, complex phenomena such as widowhood and property rights, inquirers might need more time on field to gather more information for more understanding of the phenomena. Customarily, both phenomena are really complex issues and more understanding of the tradition and its cultural practices needed more time. A stronger design in the future could incorporate multiplicity, for example, of methods (e.g., observation, mixed methods, etc), of participants (e.g., male relatives of widows, community leaders, in-laws, legal staff, etc) and of data (e.g., records from statistical offices, court proceedings on property rights violations, etc.).

Widowhood is a highly contextual phenomenon as the experiences of people widowed depend largely on the cultural context as well as legal milieu of individuals. This study could be among the first or one of a few empirical studies of Akan widows and their lived experiences in relation to property rights. The findings provide rich and contextual information about widowhood, descriptions of experiences from different contexts and survival strategies widows outside the U.S. apply for positive adaption. Findings from this study therefore contribute to the knowledge base of the Social Work Profession, Social Work in the U.S, Social Work in Ghana, Women and Feminists.
groups and the Government of Ghana as an added improvement to the Intestate Succession Law (PNDCL 111, 1985).

Conclusion

This study furthers on understanding of Ghanaian Akan widows’ contextual descriptions of their experiences and understandings of widowhood, widowhood rites, violations of the property rights as well as the protective factors they employ to continue surviving. Apart from the contextual descriptive of their daily lived experiences, this study also examined and discussed the main three themes that emerged from the data. The themes included the social location of Akan women, widows’ risk factors and their strategies for continuous survival. In addition, this study demonstrates the value and importance of allowing widows the opportunity of describing and voicing their feelings and daily lived experiences.

Despite the traumatic situations widows find themselves in after the death of their husbands, coupled with instances of abuses against them, most widows depend on their belief in God and their involvement in church activities, prayers as well as their social networks (children, family, friends, and church members) for support. These resources have been instrumental in helping them become resilient and regain their ability to function again. Still, there is the need for great changes for effective, human-centered policies.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Risk and Resilience: Ghanaian (Akan) Widows’ Experiences of Property Rights Violations

This interview guide is intended to help capture Akan widows’ subjective descriptions of their lived experiences in relation to widowhood and property rights and the strategies they employ for positive adaptation. This interview protocol consists of open-ended questions to aid our interactive conversational interview which will cover areas such as, meanings widows make out of the phenomena of widowhood & property rights violations, widows’ lived experiences both as wives and as widows, challenges confronting widows and survival strategies.

(Start interviews after establishing rapport)

1. Take a moment and reflect on the time you were married. How would you describe your lived experiences when you were married in terms of daily activities, roles or work, etc?

2. What happened after your husband’s death? (Were there any changes in terms of place of residence, property inheritance/ownership, etc.?)

3. Would you talk about your daily lived experiences as a widow in relation to your rights to property?

4. Tell me about your living experiences in this (urban/rural) community. What activities do you engage in? What do those roles mean to you?

5. What do you do, personally, when you face difficulties in your life? Has that changed as you got older?

6. What would you consider to be the challenging issues for you (and your children) as a result of the changes in your lives? What kind of things are most challenging for your daily living?

7. From the list of issues you have enumerated as challenges could you name the most two challenging issues among them? Can you describe why they are more challenging than the others?

8. How would you describe widowhood? Who are the victims of widowhood? Would you talk about your own experience of widowhood rites? What did this all mean to you?

9. What would say are the factors that have contributed to your continuous existence and functioning? Could you describe what those factors mean to you? Out of the list, which of the factors would you say is number one?
10. Do you have any religious affiliation? Can you talk about that? What does your affiliation with that religion mean to you? What roles do religious organizations/resources play in your life?

11. Can you share with me a story of someone who has coped well (in your community or elsewhere) despite facing many challenges?

12. Have you heard about the Intestate Succession Law (PNDCL 111, 1985) that the government has put in place to help widows? Have you applied it in relation to your rights to property? If yes, how? If no, why?
Demographic Information

1. Name:___________________________________________________________

2. Age:_____________   Contact Phone #: ________________________________

3. Place of Residence    (a) lives in the city    (b) lives in the rural community

4. Religion:_________________________________________________________

5. Educational Background:

   a. Primary Education_________________________________________________
   b. Secondary Education_______________________________________________
   c. Post-Secondary Education (Specific)_________________________________
   d. University Education______________________________________________
   e. No Formal Education______________________________________________

6. Nature of Occupation:______________________________________________

7. Income
   Level:______________________________________________________________

8. Type of Marriage Contracted:_________________________________________

9. Occupation at time of Marriage:_____________ Husband:___________________

10. Age at time of Marriage: ________    Husband:_________________________

11. Age at time widowed:________________________________________________

12. Number of Children:___________________ Ages:________________________

13. Number of years Married:______________
    Widowed:________________________________

14. People living in your house: _________________________________________
15. Land rights: Y / N  
Type: Rights to use only:_________  
Owner:______________________

16. Land use: Cash crop: ________________ Sustenance crops:_____________________

OBSERVATION

Homes and Communities

Fieldnotes on:

◆ Physical condition of the home in relation to other homes in the community  
  o The nature of the house; mud, block, bricks, complete/half, storey, etc.

  o Inhabitants of the home: children, siblings, parents, tenants, other relatives, etc.

  o Social status of the widow: how is she treated in the home, community, etc.
APPENDIX B

MAP OF GHANA SHOWING THE AKAN AREAS
APPENDIX C

Some Akan Cultural Symbols in Relation to Their Perception and Belief in God.

Gye Nyame (Except God)

Hyeanhye or Nyame Nwu na M’awu
(Unburnable, Imperishable)

Kerapa (Sanctity)

Funtumfunamfu, Dënkyemfunamfu...
(Symbol of Unity in Diversity, Democracy)

ɔbaa ne ɔman (the woman is the state)

Tumi te sɛ kosua (Power is like an egg)

Symbols used for many things including Architecture and textiles
APPENDIX D

WOMEN'S WORKLOAD IN GHANA