

Socioeconomic Factors Affecting Young Widows' Participation in Small-Scale Farming Activities in Mbeere South, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the socioeconomic factors influencing young widows' participation in small-scale farming activities in Mbeere South, Kenya, using a qualitative research design. The paper explores the role of cultural, economic, and gender-related factors in shaping widows' involvement in agriculture, guided by frameworks such as the Gender and Development (GAD) Theory, Social Movement Theory (SMT), and Participation Theory. Document analysis was the primary method for data collection, drawing on academic studies, government reports, and NGO documents. The data were analyzed qualitatively through systematic coding and categorization to identify key themes related to widows' challenges and opportunities in farming. The sampling process was purposive, selecting documents that provided relevant insights into the socio-economic dynamics affecting widows. Sources included government agencies, NGOs working with widows, and academic studies focused on rural development and widow empowerment. The findings show that cultural barriers, such as patriarchal gender roles, inheritance laws, and social stigma, significantly hinder widows' involvement in farming. However, education plays a crucial role in empowering widows; those with higher education are more likely to adopt modern farming techniques, access financial resources, and engage in community initiatives. The study concludes that both cultural practices and education levels are critical determinants of young widows' participation in small-scale farming. The study recommends enhancing educational opportunities, expanding agricultural extension services, and implementing legal reforms to secure land rights and reduce cultural stigma, thereby improving widows' economic security and boosting their participation in farming.

Keywords: Cultural Practices, Education, Participation, Small Scale Farming, Young Widows

I. INTRODUCTION

Globally, the tragic death of a spouse is frequently accompanied by a protracted struggle for basic rights and dignity. Despite the fact that there are over 258 million widows worldwide (United Nations, 2023), widows have historically been marginalized, invisible, and unsupported, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and portions of East Asia (Dube, 2023). Traditionally, widows were defined as married women who had lost their spouses, but as family structures evolve, this definition now includes individuals who have lost long-term partners through death, such as those in cohabitation or civil unions (Chamie, 2020).

In affluent countries, widows frequently benefit from comprehensive social welfare systems that give financial aid, healthcare, and emotional support, thereby reducing the economic and emotional difficulties of widowhood. Sweden, for example, provides large pension systems and community activities, whereas the United States provides Social Security survivor benefits and healthcare services such as Medicare, all of which play an important role in assisting widows (Munnell & Eschtruth, 2018). These systems highlight the critical role of social safety nets in managing the complex issues that widows experience in affluent countries.

In contrast, widows in Asia, particularly in South Asia, experience significant social and cultural marginalisation and are frequently seen as "unwanted insiders." Widows in countries like India face a "triple burden" of stigma, resource deprivation, and increased vulnerability, which is exacerbated by restrictive traditions such as remarriage bans and exclusion from religious ceremonies (Sharma, 2016). Widows are also marginalised, denied resources, and labelled as "unwanted foreigners" in Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka (Schultz, 2019). This exclusion emphasises the critical need for specific interventions to overcome the cultural and socioeconomic hurdles that widows confront in these countries. Widows in Sub-Saharan Africa have considerable socioeconomic disadvantages, including exclusion from economic and social possibilities (Moonga, 2017). Young widows, some as young as 15, are more susceptible to poverty and marginalisation (Van de Walle, 2017). Despite the region's high widowhood rate, many widows still have restricted access to resources, education, and healthcare, exacerbating their isolation.

Given these hurdles, widows in Sub-Saharan Africa must actively participate in development activities, such as small-scale farming initiatives, to better their socioeconomic status. Participation in these activities can help widows gain economic independence, access to resources, and social integration (United Nations, 2023). This is consistent with multiple Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), and SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), which seeks to eliminate poverty, promote gender equality, and ensure food security for vulnerable populations such as widows. However, widows' full participation is frequently hampered by socioeconomic factors such as limited access to land, financial support, and social stigma. Widows in South Africa and Nigeria typically endure disinheritance, bureaucratic barriers, and societal marginalisation, all of which contribute to their isolation and poverty (Motsoeneng & Modise, 2020; Izzi & Fab-Eme, 2020). These problems underline the importance of specialised interventions that address the unique constraints that widows confront in accessing development opportunities.

Research from East Africa gives information on the larger hurdles to women's engagement in development programs, but it frequently overlooks the specific challenges faced by widows. According to Bamutura (2017), women in Uganda with lower educational levels have less access to crucial information and resources, which limits their involvement in development activities. Similarly, Meador and O'Brien (2019) identified political obstacles in Rwanda that limit women's impact and participation in development initiatives due to a lack of female representation in decision-making roles. While these studies provide significant insights into the general barriers women encounter, they do not directly address the special difficulties faced by widows, emphasising the need for more targeted study to design inclusive treatments suited to the needs of this population.

In Kenya, research such as those by Ondiba and Matsui (2019) show that while small-scale farming and other development programs are available, women face challenges such as financial restrictions, a lack of information, and social marginalisation, preventing them from fully participating. Bureaucratic barriers and limited outreach exacerbate access to these programs, making it harder for widows to fully benefit. These studies often focus on the broader issues that rural women confront, but they do not directly address widows' special struggles. This lacuna in the literature emphasises the need for research that focuses on the specific difficulties that widows encounter, allowing for more effective and tailored solutions.

Widows in Mbeere South Sub-County frequently live in extreme poverty, face gender discrimination, and experience social isolation as a result of limited control over economic resources such as land and assets (Nyaki, 2020). Despite these hurdles, there is a scarcity of study on how socio-cultural factors, educational levels, political dynamics, and policy execution affect widows' participation in small-scale agricultural initiatives. This gap highlights the significance of doing specialised study on the socioeconomic determinants impacting widows, which will provide insights into their unique issues and inform the creation of targeted interventions to increase their participation in development activities.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Kenya, home to an estimated eight million widows, ranks 33rd globally in terms of the challenges widows face, as highlighted in a United Nations report (Birech, 2019). This statistic underscores the severe hardships experienced across the country, including in Mbeere South Sub-County, where widows often struggle with limited support systems. Although widows may receive initial assistance from religious leaders and community members following the death of a spouse, this support is typically short-lived, leaving many to face isolation and systemic barriers (Nyaki, 2020). Despite the potential of small-scale farming and development initiatives to empower widows economically, socio-cultural restrictions, inadequate access to resources, and insufficient support systems persist, significantly hindering their progress toward economic independence.

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5 on Gender Equality and SDG 10 on Reduced Inequalities, emphasize the importance of uplifting vulnerable groups, including widows, to foster socio-economic inclusion and equity (United Nations, 2023). However, in rural Kenya, particularly in areas like Mbeere South Sub-County, widows face entrenched challenges tied socioeconomic factors. Many widows lack access to education or vocational training, hindering their ability to adopt modern farming techniques or improve agricultural productivity. Additionally, deeply rooted cultural norms further marginalize them by restricting decision-making power and access to critical resources such as land, credit, and markets (Kamunyu & Makena, 2020).

While programs such as the Women Enterprise Fund aim to promote socio-economic inclusion, these initiatives fail to address the unique intersection of educational and cultural challenges faced by widows (Okech, 2019). Moreover, there is no dedicated allocation of resources or targeted advocacy specifically supporting widows in Kenya's rural development agenda. This oversight perpetuates their economic exclusion and deprives them of opportunities for meaningful participation in sustainable development initiatives. Existing studies, such as Momanyi et al. (2021), have explored socio-economic empowerment among widows in Kajiado West Sub-County but have not adequately examined how educational gaps and cultural practices influence widows' participation in small-scale



farming in rural contexts like Mbeere South Sub-County. Therefore, this study sought to bridge these gaps by investigating the socio-economic factors affecting young widows' participation in small-scale farming activities in Mbeere South, Kenya.

1.2 Research Objectives

The study sought to:

- i. Examine the Influence of Cultural Practices on Young Rural Widows' Participation in Small-Scale Farming Projects in Mbeere South Sub-County, Embu County, Kenya.
- ii. Assess the Role of Education Level in Shaping Young Rural Widows' Involvement in Small-Scale Farming Projects in Mbeere South Sub-County, Embu County, Kenya.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Review

The study is anchored on three key theoretical frameworks: Gender and Development (GAD), Social Movement Theory, and Participatory Development Theory. These frameworks offer a comprehensive approach to examining the socio-economic determinants that influence young rural widows' participation in small-scale farming activities in Mbeere South Sub-County, Embu County, Kenya. By integrating these theories, the study sought to provide an understanding of the barriers and opportunities faced by young widows in agricultural development and the role that cultural practices, education, and political factors play in shaping their involvement.

2.1.1 Gender and Development Theory

Gender and Development (GAD) theory emerged in the 1980s as a critique of earlier approaches that primarily focused on women as victims of development (Rathgeber, 1990). GAD shifts the focus from women to the relational aspects of gender, emphasizing the need to understand and challenge the structures and practices that contribute to gender inequality (Jaquette, 2017). The theory argues that the social construction of gender roles leads to disparities in access to resources, opportunities, and decision-making power between men and women (Moser, 1989). By applying GAD to this study, the focus is on how cultural practices surrounding widowhood, such as inheritance rights and social exclusion, hinder young widows' ability to participate fully in small-scale farming activities. For example, in many African contexts, widows often face legal and social challenges related to property ownership and inheritance, which can limit their economic independence and involvement in agricultural activities (Wenzek, 2022).

GAD theory also underscores the need for policy interventions that address these gendered power imbalances, which can create more inclusive development strategies. In the case of young rural widows in Mbeere South Sub-County, GAD provides a framework to explore how gendered expectations and cultural norms limit their economic opportunities, particularly in small-scale farming, and how addressing these norms can enhance their participation in development initiatives.

2.1.2 Social Movement Theory

Social Movement Theory offers a framework for understanding how individuals and groups mobilize to challenge social structures and advocate for change (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). This theory posits that social movements emerge when people recognize a collective grievance and mobilize resources to demand social, political, or economic change (McAdam, 2017). In the context of young rural widows, Social Movement Theory is particularly useful for analyzing how political factors and external advocacy may shape their participation in small-scale farming activities. Political dynamics, such as local government policies, access to social protection programs, and community advocacy, can either enable or hinder widows' ability to engage in farming initiatives (Gillan, 2020).

The theory also highlights the importance of rational decision-making in mobilization. Widows, particularly in rural areas, may need to weigh the perceived benefits and costs of participating in small-scale farming activities. The support they receive from political actors, NGOs, or community organizations may influence their decision to engage in these activities. Social Movement Theory helps to explore how widows can use collective action to demand more inclusive and supportive development policies that enhance their economic participation (Scott, 2023). However, critics argue that the theory often overlooks the unpredictability of social movements and the complexity of individual agency within these movements (Chigwedere & Moran, 2022). Thus, the study draws on this theory while integrating other perspectives to capture the full range of factors influencing widows' participation.

2.1.3 Participatory Development Theory

Participatory Development Theory was popularized by Paulo Freire in the 1970s, advocating for the active involvement of communities in the development process, particularly in decision-making, planning, and

implementation (Alharbi & Alsaif, 2021). This theory highlights the importance of empowering local communities, ensuring that development initiatives are not imposed from the top down but are shaped by the needs, knowledge, and priorities of the community members themselves (Brett, 2003). Participatory development emphasizes the inclusion of marginalized groups, including women and vulnerable populations like widows, in all stages of development activities. It recognizes the importance of local knowledge and the need to build the capacity of community members to take ownership of development processes (Servaes & Servaes, 2021).

In relation to young rural widows, Participatory Development Theory provides a critical framework for understanding how their inclusion in small-scale farming activities can enhance their economic and social empowerment. By ensuring that widows are involved in the planning and implementation of agricultural initiatives, the theory suggests that these activities will be more sustainable and relevant to their needs. The study explores how improving the education levels of young widows can empower them to take active roles in farming, thus promoting economic advancement and social cohesion within their communities. As noted by Brett (2003), when individuals feel ownership over development activities, they are more likely to invest time and resources into ensuring the project's success, leading to better outcomes for both the individuals and the community at large.

2.1 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Widows Participation in Development Activities

In the United States, Stockton (2015) reported that women make up 11 million of the 13 million bereaved spouses, and many of them face significant challenges, including financial hardship, loneliness, isolation, and a sense of being misunderstood by their communities. However, Stockton's report has some limitations. It does not explore the extent of women's participation in development activities, an important factor that could offer deeper insights into their socio-economic status. Furthermore, the report presents a general view of development, without distinguishing between different types of activities. Each type of project, such as small-scale farming, presents its own set of challenges and opportunities that can greatly affect women's experiences and their level of involvement. Therefore, a more focused approach that examines specific development activities would better capture the experiences and contributions of bereaved women across different contexts.

Similarly, Rao (2015) conducted a study on women's participation in the workforce in rural Tamil Nadu, using household surveys and in-depth interviews. The study highlighted that the nature and social valuation of women's work plays a significant role in community development. It also considered factors such as age, life stage (including marital status and number of children), reproductive success, and economic status. While the study offers valuable insights into the role of women in their communities, it is not directly focused on women's participation in community development. Additionally, it has several limitations. First, it is based on the specific cultural and geographical context of rural Tamil Nadu, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions or cultural settings. Moreover, the study does not address widows, a group that faces unique challenges and opportunities. To address this gap, the current study focuses on the socio-economic factors affecting young widows' participation in small-scale farming activities in Mbeere South Sub-County, Kenya. By concentrating on this specific demographic and context, the study aims to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing young widows' involvement in small-scale farming, contributing to more effective and targeted development interventions.

2.2.2 Cultural practices and Young Widows' Participation in Development Activities

Masanya (2023) examines the persistent issue of unequal and limited access to opportunities for women in South Africa, with a focus on the progress made towards gender equality and women's empowerment as outlined in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The study uses a review of secondary data to assess how cultural factors influence women's participation. One of the key findings highlights the significant role that cultural norms and practices play in perpetuating gender disparities. These cultural influences often limit women's access to essential resources, decision-making roles, and economic activities. Traditional gender roles restrict women's access to land, financial resources, and contribute to wage inequality. Although the study provides important insights, it has limitations. It does not offer sufficient detail on the extent to which cultural factors specifically influence women's participation. Moreover, it treats both men and women as a general group, without distinguishing between different sub-groups, which may overlook specific challenges faced by women from diverse socio-economic backgrounds or regions. By focusing specifically on widows, the current study aims to offer a more detailed and nuanced understanding of the impact of cultural factors on women's participation.

Kisiang'ani (2016) investigated the factors affecting women's participation in project implementation through a case study of a gender mainstreaming project in selected government ministries in Nairobi County. The study found that although there was an increase in the number of women in political leadership in Kenya, there was little change in gender roles concerning decision-making and planning of gender-responsive activities. The patriarchal culture, which



entrenches male dominance and traditional gender roles, still prevailed within the ministries. Despite the existence of gender equality laws and policies, their impact on gender mainstreaming was minimal. However, the study has several limitations. It addresses both men and women, rather than focusing specifically on the unique challenges faced by widows. Additionally, it does not explore the extent to which the increase in female political leadership has influenced gender mainstreaming efforts, nor does it delve into specific cultural practices that might impact women's participation in different contexts. To fill these gaps, the current study focuses on the influence of cultural practices on young rural widows' participation in small-scale farming activities in Mbeere South Sub-County, Embu County, Kenya. By specifically examining widows, this study aims to provide a more in-depth understanding of the unique cultural factors that influence their participation in such activities.

2.2.3 Education level and Young Widows' Participation in Development Activities

Kicheleri (2020) emphasizes that higher education levels are crucial for enhancing women's participation in community development activities, particularly by boosting their ability to adopt new technologies and make informed decisions. However, the study has several limitations. It adopts a broad focus on women as a whole, failing to address specific sub-groups like young rural widows, who face distinct challenges and opportunities. Additionally, the study does not account for important contextual factors, such as the impact of cultural practices and socio-economic conditions, which can significantly shape women's participation. Furthermore, it does not explore how education specifically influences involvement in small-scale farming activities. In contrast, this study aims to address these gaps by focusing on young rural widows in Mbeere South Sub-County. By examining the influence of varying educational levels on their participation in farming activities, this study provides a more focused approach, taking into account the unique socio-cultural and economic barriers that widows face.

Similarly, Kamuzora (2024) underscores the importance of educational attainment in enhancing women's participation in community development initiatives, showing that education can significantly improve women's engagement in such activities. However, the study has notable limitations, particularly its small sample size of 100 women, which may not adequately capture the diverse experiences and needs of women from different backgrounds. Moreover, the study takes a general approach to women's participation, without considering the specific challenges faced by sub-groups like widows. Widows often encounter unique socio-economic and cultural obstacles that affect their ability to engage in community development, which the study fails to address. In contrast, this research specifically focuses on widows, offering a deeper understanding of how education and other factors influence their involvement in community development activities. By examining the distinct barriers and opportunities faced by widows, this study aims to provide insights that can inform the design of more targeted interventions to enhance their participation in small-scale farming activities.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

To pursue the study objectives, a qualitative methodology was employed, using document analysis and alternative assessment to explore the socioeconomic determinants influencing young widows' participation in small-scale farming activities in Mbeere South Sub-County, Embu County, Kenya. Document analysis was chosen as it offers insight into the study population's dynamics through existing records (e.g., academic studies and government records), which provide a lens into a group's behaviors, norms, and challenges that cannot be observed directly (Morgan, 2022). This methodology is ideal for investigating the socio-economic factors influencing young widows' participation in small-scale farming activities in Mbeere South, Kenya, where limited research exists (Creswell & Plano, 2018). It provides context-specific insights into the challenges and opportunities young widows face, focusing on how cultural, economic, and gender factors shape their involvement in farming activities. This approach aims to uncover the complexities of their experiences, offering a deeper understanding of the socio-economic conditions that affect their participation in such activities.

3.2 Data Collection Procedures

Existing documents were particularly valuable in revealing the socioeconomic and cultural barriers faced by young widows in accessing small-scale farming opportunities in Mbeere South Sub-County. These sources included records from the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, the Ministry of Agriculture, and various NGOs involved in widow support and rural development programs. Academic databases, such as those from St. Paul's University, and policy documents like Kenya Vision 2030 and local agricultural strategies, provided essential insights into the institutional and economic factors affecting rural women's empowerment. Such records were useful in formulating evaluation questions, constructing interview questions, identifying significant events and conditions for observation, and comparing subgroups such as widows who farm to those who do not (Creswell, 2021). However, a potential

limitation of relying on these documents was the possibility of encountering incomplete or inaccurate records, which could impact the study's depth and overall reliability (Kothari, 2019).

3.3 Study Area

The study site, Mbeere South Sub-County, is geographically located within Embu County, Kenya, and is defined by latitudes 0.62 to -0.68 (00° 37' 14" S, 00° 40' 50" S) and longitudes 37.53 to 37.79 (37° 30' 4" E, 37° 47' 56" E). This area has a widowed population of 1,562 young women, who often encounter specific socioeconomic and cultural constraints that hinder their involvement in sustainable agricultural practices. By focusing on this group, the study seeks to identify the unique barriers and opportunities they face, aiming to develop tailored interventions that enhance their participation in farming activities and ultimately improve their socioeconomic standing.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data was analysed using a qualitative methodology, with document analysis serving as the major strategy. Relevant documents, such as policy papers, community records, government reports, and academic research, were thoroughly studied to gain insights into how cultural practices and educational levels influence young rural widows' participation in small-scale farming. These materials were chosen for their relevance to the research aims and their capacity to give information on societal norms, educational hurdles, and institutional frameworks that influence widows' participation in agriculture. The approach entailed a thorough assessment of the content, collecting significant data points, and categorising them into meaningful themes that were matched with the study's aims (Creswell & Plano, 2018).

Thematic analysis was used on the data gathered from the analysed materials to identify patterns and themes relevant to the widows' experiences. Key themes found included the influence of cultural stigma, limited educational possibilities, institutional barriers to resource availability, and the significance of support systems in overcoming these obstacles (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). These themes were examined to determine their connection and aggregate impact on widows' ability to participate in small-scale farming. By synthesising insights from the document analysis, the study was able to present evidence-based recommendations that addressed the specific issues encountered by widows and proposed targeted interventions to increase their socioeconomic empowerment through greater access to agricultural possibilities.

IV. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Cultural Practices and Young Rural Widows' Participation in Small-Scale Farming Activities

The objective of this study was to examine the influence of cultural practices on young rural widows' participation in small-scale farming projects in Mbeere South Sub-County, Embu County, Kenya. The findings from the study reveal that cultural practices, deeply rooted in patriarchal norms, significantly affect the economic opportunities available to young widows, shaping their ability to engage in agricultural activities. The following factors were identified as key components influencing widows' participation in small-scale farming: Patriarchal Cultural Norms and Gender Roles, Inheritance and Land Ownership, Social Stigma and Isolation, and Cultural Support Systems and Community Initiatives as presented below.

4.1.1 Patriarchal Cultural Norms and Gender Roles

The current study's document analysis reveals that patriarchal cultural norms and gender roles are the key barriers to widows' engagement in small-scale farming in Mbeere South Sub-County. These ingrained conventions frequently deprive widows the right to inherit land and access critical farming resources, which are usually controlled by male relatives. In this setting, men and women's roles within the family and community structure influence agricultural decision-making processes. Widows, particularly young widows, are excluded from these decisions because they are seen as having a reduced status after their spouses' deaths. As a result, they face substantial economic marginalisation, as they are unable to fully participate in farming operations critical to their existence. This exclusion is consistent with Mwenzwa's (2019) results, which show that widows in rural areas are frequently excluded from agricultural organisations and community-based decision-making forums, limiting their capacity to improve their socioeconomic situation.

The current study's findings are also compatible with Masenya's (2023) work, which investigates the prevalent issue of gender inequality in South Africa, specifically the impact of patriarchal cultural norms on women's access to opportunities. Although Masenya's research is set in South Africa, it illustrates how cultural norms limit women's access to land, resources, and decision-making positions, which is similar to the challenges widows confront in Mbeere South. Masenya's study emphasises the limitations of cultural influences in improving women's economic engagement, which is reflected in the findings of this study. Furthermore, Kisiang'ani (2016) examines gender

mainstreaming efforts in Kenya, demonstrating that despite legal frameworks intended at promoting gender equality, patriarchal cultural practices persist, impeding women's participation in decision-making processes. This is consistent with the current study's findings, which reveal that even after regulatory reforms; patriarchal institutions continue to exclude widows from critical agricultural jobs. These findings support the concept that patriarchal cultural norms and gender roles continue to be substantial hurdles to widows' full economic engagement in rural areas.

4.1.2 Inheritance and Land Ownership

Based on an examination of secondary data, this study finds that inheritance practices and land ownership considerably limit the economic engagement of young widows in Mbeere South. Customary regulations, which frequently favour male relatives such as brothers-in-law, prohibit widows from claiming ownership or rights to family land. Widows without male offspring face even greater obstacles, as they are often barred from inheriting land. The lack of solid land tenure limits their capacity to engage in small-scale farming, which is critical to their livelihoods. Given that land is a critical resource for agricultural enterprises, its exclusion reduces their economic autonomy and chances for financial growth. These findings are consistent with Momanyi et al. (2021), who identified the inability to access land as a major obstacle to widows investing in farming and improving their livelihoods. The study emphasises how the lack of legal acknowledgement for widows' land rights substantially limits their potential to achieve economic stability through agricultural operations.

Furthermore, the current findings are similar with Nyaki (2020), who discusses the harmful impact of patriarchal inheritance laws on widows' access to land in Mbeere South. Nyaki's research demonstrates that widows, particularly those without male children, are routinely excluded from land ownership, compounding their economic marginalization. Both studies emphasise the need for legal reforms to protect widows' land rights, which would increase their engagement in agricultural operations and improve their economic outcomes. While the literature generally agrees that inheritance and land ownership play a critical role in limiting widows' economic opportunities, the current study highlights the urgent need for legal and policy reforms to empower widows by providing them with secure land tenure and enabling agricultural success.

4.1.3 Social Stigma and Isolation

The findings from this study reveal that social stigma and cultural perceptions of widowhood further isolate young widows in Mbeere South, limiting their participation in farming activities. Widows are often viewed as incomplete or unlucky, which leads to their social exclusion from community activities, including agricultural cooperatives (Mwangi, 2019). This social marginalization can have significant negative effects on widows' ability to access key resources, such as information, technical support, and agricultural networks that are critical for farming success. In Mbeere South, widows are often left without the social support systems that could help them navigate the challenges of farming, resulting in emotional and psychological barriers that affect their motivation and participation in agricultural activities. Nyaki (2020) emphasizes that the lack of inclusion in these networks makes it difficult for widows to sustain farming activities, ultimately reducing their opportunities for economic empowerment. This finding suggests the need to reduce social stigma and promote widow inclusion in community activities and agricultural initiatives, which could empower them to improve their livelihoods.

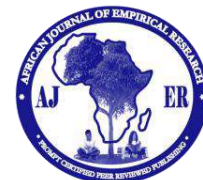
4.1.4 Cultural Support Systems and Community Initiatives

The study also identified that, despite these cultural challenges, there are some positive cultural support systems in Mbeere South that can empower young widows. Informal networks, such as women's groups and rotating savings and credit associations (ROSCAs), were found to provide valuable resources for widows, offering access to credit, farming tools, and shared knowledge (Nyaki, 2020). These community-based support systems can help mitigate the challenges faced by widows in accessing resources for farming and improving their livelihoods.

However, the study found that the impact of these informal networks is often limited due to their lack of formal structure and reach. Nyaoro (2019) also pointed out that while these networks are beneficial, they do not have the organizational structure necessary to support a larger number of widows. The findings of this study suggest that strengthening and formalizing these community-based initiatives could enhance their sustainability and impact. By formalizing these support systems, more widows could benefit from the resources they provide, thereby improving their participation in small-scale farming and increasing their economic empowerment.

Education Level and Young Rural Widows' Participation in Small-Scale Farming Activities

In alignment with the study's second objective, "to assess the role of education level in shaping young rural widows' involvement in small-scale farming projects in Mbeere South Sub-County, Embu County, Kenya," this section explores the influence of education on widows' engagement in agricultural activities. The level of education a widow attains plays a pivotal role in shaping her ability to participate in, and benefit from, farming projects. The



following findings demonstrate how education levels affect young rural widows' agricultural practices, access to resources, and community participation.

4.2 Education and Agricultural Knowledge

The study reveals that young rural widows in Mbeere South Sub-County with higher education levels, as supported by Mwangi's (2019) research, are more likely to adopt modern farming techniques, diversify agricultural activities, and engage in agricultural business ventures, leading to increased productivity and economic stability. Educated widows have greater access to agricultural extension services, training programs, and market opportunities, all of which contribute to improved farming efficiency. In contrast, widows with lower education levels tend to rely on traditional farming methods, which limit their productivity and economic advancement. This finding aligns with Masenya's (2023) assertion that individuals with limited education often lack the skills necessary to make informed decisions about agricultural management, leading to stagnation in farming productivity. Moreover, the gap in educational attainment restricts their ability to engage with agricultural support systems, such as government extension services, which typically cater to literate farmers.

The study underscores the importance of providing targeted educational opportunities and agricultural training to widows to enhance their farming efficiency. Initiatives aimed at improving agricultural literacy, especially in rural areas where education access may be limited, are crucial for the economic empowerment of widows. By equipping them with modern farming knowledge, these programs can help widows transition from subsistence farming to more commercial and sustainable agricultural practices. This, in turn, can lead to better financial outcomes and improved livelihoods, fostering greater economic independence and stability for young rural widows in Mbeere South Sub-County.

4.2.1 Access to Resources and Financial Support

Another key finding from the study is that education plays a critical role in improving widows' ability to access financial support and resources necessary for farming. Widows with higher education levels are more likely to navigate financial systems, secure loans, credit, and agricultural grants, which are essential for purchasing inputs such as seeds, fertilizers, and farming tools. As noted by Nyaga (2021), educated widows in Mbeere South are better positioned to engage with financial institutions and agricultural support programs due to their literacy and numeracy skills. However, less-educated widows often face significant barriers in accessing these resources, which restricts their ability to invest in farming and expand their enterprises. This gap in financial access is a significant barrier to their full participation in agricultural activities and contributes to their continued economic marginalization (Nyaki, 2020). This study underscores the need for educational and financial literacy programs tailored to widows, particularly those in rural areas, to help them overcome these barriers and improve their economic standing.

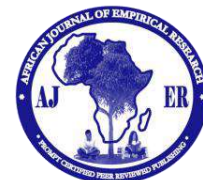
4.2.2 Social and Community Engagement

Education also affects a widow's ability to engage socially and participate in community-based agricultural initiatives. A study by Nyaoro (2019) shows that educated widows are more likely to be involved in farming cooperatives and community initiatives such as women's groups, which are essential for sharing resources, knowledge, and marketing opportunities. Educated widows tend to have better communication skills and are more likely to advocate for their needs within these community structures. Conversely, widows with lower education levels may face difficulties in participating in such groups, as they may not possess the necessary confidence or social capital to engage effectively. Social exclusion due to low educational levels can further hinder their participation in agricultural activities, limiting their access to collective resources and support systems. This highlights the importance of promoting social networks and community engagement for widows, alongside educational initiatives.

V. CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusions

The study concludes that both cultural practices and education level play significant roles in shaping young rural widows' participation in small-scale farming activities in Mbeere South Sub-County, Embu County, Kenya. Cultural factors, including traditional gender roles, inheritance practices, social stigma, and prevailing beliefs about widowhood, impose considerable barriers to widows' engagement in farming. These practices limit their access to land, decision-making opportunities, and involvement in community agricultural initiatives. On the other hand, the study finds that education level is a crucial determinant in widows' ability to succeed in small-scale farming. Widows with higher educational levels are better equipped to adopt modern farming techniques, access financial resources, and engage in cooperative farming activities, all of which enhance their productivity and economic independence. However, the study also concludes that lower educational levels pose significant barriers, hindering access to essential



resources and social support, thereby restricting their capacity to fully participate in and benefit from agricultural activities. Addressing cultural practices alongside improving educational opportunities for young widows is critical to enhancing their participation and success in small-scale farming activities in Mbeere South.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study suggests a concerted effort to increase the educational levels of young widows in Mbeere South Sub-County through easily available adult education programs and specialised financial literacy training. These efforts should be customised to the specific needs of widows, providing them with necessary skills in contemporary farming practices, smart financial management, and resource mobilisation. Expanding agricultural extension programs to provide practical knowledge on sustainable farming practices would increase agricultural productivity even more. By closing educational gaps, these approaches can help widows adopt more effective farming practices, gain access to financial resources, and increase their economic independence and participation in small-scale farming.

Furthermore, cultural reforms are required to confront and transform old attitudes and behaviours that prevent widows from fully participating in agriculture. Community sensitisation activities should be implemented to minimise stigma and increase acknowledgement of widows as vital economic contributors. Along with these measures, legal reforms must ensure that widows' land rights are protected, allowing them equitable access to farmland. Addressing cultural barriers and securing necessary resources will allow widows to actively participate in small-scale farming, enhancing their livelihoods and economic stability.

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