

INFLUENCE OF GENDER NORMS ON SPOUSAL GRIEF AMONG WIDOWED INDIVIDUALS IN SIAYA COUNTY, KENYA

¹Elly Okoth Otunga*, ¹Michael Mabururu Ntabo, ¹Wilson A. P.Otengah, ¹Taji I. Shivachi

*Corresponding Author: eotunga@rongovarsity.ac.ke

<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-0609-1739>; <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-9636-2350>; <https://orcid.org/009.002-4774-1968>;
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4851-3756>

¹Rongo University, P.O. Box 103-40404 Rongo, Kenya

Abstract

Gender norms are essential in shaping individual experiences of grief. They guide social practices and psychosocial responses. This study assessed the influence of gender norms on spousal grief among widowed persons in Siaya County, Kenya. Siaya County has one of the highest national proportions of widowed persons, at 11.5%. The study was guided by the Social Constructionism Theory of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky. A mixed-method approach and a descriptive research design were adopted to assess the interplay between gender norms and spousal grief. Data were collected through questionnaires, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions. Using Cochran's formula, a sample of 399 main respondents, comprising widowed individuals, was selected through a multi-stage cluster sampling technique. On the other hand, key informants comprising chiefs, religious leaders, and village elders were purposively sampled. The study ensured validity and internal consistency reliability. Quantitative data were analysed using frequency counts, percentage counts, mean, and standard deviation. Inferentially, regression was used to establish the relationship between belief systems and spousal grief. Thematic analysis was used for qualitative data. Ethical considerations were upheld throughout the study. It emerged that socially constructed roles of women as primary caretakers and moral custodians continue to shape their personal mourning practices (Mean = 3.75, SD = 1.15). At the same time, widowers feel pressured to uphold traditional masculine roles during grief, reflecting internalized stoicism and responsibility. Community expectations for men were slightly higher than their own convictions, particularly in financial provision and maintaining social appearances (Mean = 3.61, SD = 1.23). Expectations to suppress emotions and avoid childcare responsibilities were higher from the community perspective (Means = 3.31 and 3.23, respectively). They strongly believed that their grief is more publicly recognized than men's, including expressing a strong sense of responsibility in maintaining household continuity. The findings reiterate that gender was a significant predictor ($\beta = .12, p = .025$), with women experiencing higher grief intensity compared to men due to structural and social inequalities that women face. The study concludes that gender-related convictions and community expectations explained 31% of the variance in grief scores (F-test, $p < .001$; $R^2 = .31$). The study therefore recommends that Ministry of Public Service, Gender, and Affirmative Action, in collaboration with the County Government of Siaya, should upscale targeted interventions to challenge and transform adverse gender norms associated with widowhood in Siaya County.

Keywords: Gender norms, gender roles, spousal grief, widowhood.

Introduction

Grief as a natural response to loss is one of the key global experiences which is highly influenced by gender norms (UN Women, 2022). While biological and psychosocial aspects of grief are widely acknowledged, the meanings

attached to loss and how individuals cope with it are influenced by societal contexts (Dorgbetor, 2022; Dube, 2023). The loss of a spouse not only disrupts an individual's psychosocial stability but also alters their social roles, responsibilities, and community identity

(Skritskaya et al., 2020). Spousal grief is influenced by gender norms that provide frameworks on how individuals interpret death (Burr, 2015). Although spousal loss is globally recognised as a disruptive life event with long-term psychosocial and health effects, spousal grief does not occur uniformly across individuals. Its expression, duration, and resolution are influenced by cultural contexts. These sociocultural influences may lead to unequal grieving outcomes, limiting healthy adaptation and reinforcing disparities in spousal grief experiences, an aspect which this study sought to investigate.

Gender norms, according to Bonvillain (2020), often assign men as breadwinners and women as caregivers. In patriarchal cultures, men are viewed as the primary breadwinners of the family; the loss of a husband may suddenly make the widow take responsibility for the family's financial well-being. These roles vary across social contexts but strongly influence responsibilities such as income generation, housework, and childcare. Gender norms vary significantly across cultures and periods. Gender norms encompass a range of behaviours, expectations, and stereotypes associated with masculinity and femininity. Changes in these gendered roles due to widowhood may negatively affect spousal grief by adding stress and adjustment challenges (Song & Kim, 2024).

According to Song and Kim (2024), gendered role changes, or the shifts in responsibilities and expectations related to traditional gender roles, can significantly influence spousal grief among widowed individuals in adverse ways. These role changes can be particularly challenging, as they add a layer of stress and adjustment during an already difficult time. According to Barrenetxea et al. (2023), sometimes widows may face financial pressure after losing a breadwinner, while widowers may struggle with new caregiving duties, both leading to emotional and practical difficulties. This may be challenging if she has not been involved in financial matters or employment. The pressure to assume the role of the primary provider may lead to financial stress and insecurity. On the other hand, widowers may be faced with taking on caregiving responsibilities that were traditionally handled by their deceased wives. This includes caring for children, managing the household,

and other caregiving tasks. Adjusting to these new roles can be overwhelming, especially if the widower lacks prior experience or support. Despite these practices possibly being supportive, they may become avenues of tension when cultural expectations are not in agreement with personal beliefs and modern rights-based discourses.

Spousal grief in Kenya is psychosocially draining. This situation is worse in Siaya County because it has one of the highest national proportions of widowed individuals, at 11.5%, second only to Turkana County at 12.1% (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). It is marked by strongly held belief systems, which are a key aspect of rural life in major parts of the county. This reality makes the county a significant site for exploring how cultural beliefs and religious traditions shape the grieving process. The study situated spousal grief within a cultural and religious framework, emphasizing that mourning is not just about sorrow but also fulfilling social expectations, negotiating communal identities, and reconciling with spiritual worldviews (Liu et al., 2019; Umberson & Montez, 2010).

The study was guided by Social Constructionism Theory as propounded by Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky. It posits that individuals do not merely passively experience reality; rather, they actively construct their understanding of reality through their interactions, language, and cultural context (Burr, 2015). This theory highlights the significant role of cultural and social factors in shaping how individuals experience and express grief (Young & Colin, 2004). In this case, the experience of loss and spousal grief is not universal but is constructed within socio-cultural norms and practices. The theory allows for an exploration of how different ethnic groups, families, and communities construct grief differently, influenced by their socio-cultural norms. The theory underscores that reality is not an objective phenomenon that exists independent of human interpretation. It is shaped through social interaction and shared meanings (McCullough, 2020). Thus, understanding mourning is both an internal psychosocial response and a social experience. That is, widowed individuals adapt to loss by incorporating religious teachings, cultural narratives, and social expectations into their coping strategies. Grieving

widowed individuals may assimilate their experience into religious frameworks by perceiving the loss as part of a deity's plan. At the same time, they accommodate cultural rituals that provide community recognition of their new social status. In Siaya County, mourning songs, ritualised expressions of grief, and symbolic acts of remembrance function as cultural tools that shape how widowed individuals experience and express loss. These practices provide structure to the grieving process, making it intelligible within a broader social framework (Umberson & Montez, 2010). The mourning journey, therefore, cannot be fully understood without reference to the belief systems that mediate their experiences.

In a study by Makanga (2022), while exploring the lived experiences of widows in Bungoma County, a range of challenges were found to be affecting widows. These included land disinheritance, emotional isolation, and cultural practices such as wife inheritance and mourning seclusion. Feelings of abandonment were also found to be pronounced among the extended family members, who felt overburdened with new responsibilities. However, some also expressed gradual personal growth and adaptation over time. While the study contributes to an understanding of how widowhood unfolds within patriarchal, rural African settings, where gendered power dynamics significantly influence bereavement outcomes, it primarily focuses on hardship, with insufficient attention to coping mechanisms, social resilience, or support structures that may mitigate grief.

Research Methodology

A convergent mixed-method approach was adopted with a descriptive research design to capture the complexity of spousal grief as shaped by belief systems (Søraa et al., 2023). This approach enabled the study to obtain richer insights about the lived experiences of widowed individuals. That is, by obtaining a structured way of assessing various religious and cultural practices, and the meanings attached to these practices.

This study was conducted in Siaya County in Kenya, which was selected due to its high proportion of widowed persons (11.5%), second only to Turkana County at 12.1% (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Turkana had the highest rate. However, safety

concerns, as it is marred by frequent banditry, made it unsuitable, in line with the Social Research Association (2006) guidelines prioritizing safety and accessibility (Diener et al., 2018).

The target population comprised widowed individuals in the study area as the main respondents because of their experiential knowledge of spousal grief. Specific focus was on the respondents who were willing to share their experiences and who had diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and connections within the community.

Main respondents were selected using a multi-stage cluster sampling technique to ensure fair representation across different categories, such as gender, age, religious affiliation, and rural-urban. This enabled the study to capture diverse experiences of the respondents, given that the population of Siaya County is heterogeneous. On the other hand, purposive sampling was used to select the key informants who comprised religious leaders, cultural elders, chiefs, and assistant chiefs because of their expert knowledge of beliefs, traditions, and legal frameworks, as well as how they relate to spousal grief.

Quantitative data were collected by administering closed-ended questionnaires to the main respondents, who were widowed individuals in the study area. On the other hand, for qualitative data, the open-ended section allowed the respondents to share their experiences freely, as recommended by (Harris & Brown, 2019). This was backed by in-depth interviews conducted using interview guides with the key informants. Additionally, focus group discussions (FGDs) were also done to shed more light on some of the aspects that required more clarity as pointed out by Sim and Waterfield (2019).

Quantitative data were descriptively analysed using frequency counts, percentages, mean and standard deviations. Inferentially, regression was used to enable the study to quantify and predict how different norms contribute to variations in grief experiences, thereby establishing whether sociocultural factors significantly affect spousal grief outcomes in Siaya County, as recommended by Sarstedt and Mooi (2018). For the case of qualitative data, thematic analysis was done.

Since bereavement is a sensitive phenomenon, caution was taken to protect the dignity and rights of

respondents, as recommended by Woolford et al. (2020). The study gave respondents informed consent letters, which they read and signed to show their acceptance to participate. They were informed of the purpose of the study, as well as their freedom to participate voluntarily and exit at will. Confidentiality was ensured by ensuring that the responses were anonymous and that no details could identify them. This was also ensured by assigning random codes to the instruments. The study also ensured professional conduct in all interactions with respondents.

Results and Discussions

The descriptive analysis of gender norms provides findings on responses of widowed individuals' convictions about how they feel they should behave during mourning and compares these with perceived community expectations. This allowed for identification

of potential discrepancies between personal beliefs and societal pressures, which may exacerbate or mitigate grief experiences. The analysis recognized that men and women may internalize and respond to norms differently due to historically and culturally prescribed roles.

Tables 1 and 2 provide a summary of gender norms among the widowed individuals ($n = 311$), distributed as male ($n = 117$) and female ($n = 194$). This categorizes felt convictions, encompassing personal beliefs about mourning behaviours, and community expectations, reflecting their perceptions of societal norms regarding gender-specific mourning roles. It further laid the groundwork for examining the alignment or divergence between individual beliefs and societal pressures.

Table 1

Gender Norms – Felt Convictions vs Community Expectations for Male Respondents

Item Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
I feel I should suppress my emotions during mourning	18 (15.4%)	16 (13.7%)	29 (24.8%)	28 (24.0%)	26 (22.2%)	3.08	1.26
I believe I should remarry quickly after my spouse's death	22 (18.8%)	18 (15.4%)	28 (23.9%)	26 (22.2%)	23 (19.7%)	3.02	1.29
I feel responsible for leading mourning rituals	20 (17.1%)	20 (17.1%)	29 (24.8%)	25 (21.4%)	23 (19.7%)	3.01	1.27
I feel I must provide financially for my family despite grief	12 (10.3%)	15 (12.8%)	28 (23.9%)	32 (27.4%)	30 (25.6%)	3.54	1.24
I feel I should maintain social appearances during mourning	18 (15.4%)	17 (14.5%)	30 (25.6%)	28 (24.0%)	24 (20.5%)	3.13	1.25
I feel I should avoid participating in childcare while grieving	22 (18.8%)	19 (16.2%)	28 (23.9%)	27 (23.1%)	21 (18.0%)	3.05	1.28
I feel men's grief is less socially recognized than women's	21 (18.0%)	17 (14.5%)	28 (23.9%)	26 (22.2%)	25 (21.4%)	3.17	1.31
Constructs for Community Expectations							
Men are expected to suppress emotions during mourning	14 (12.0%)	15 (12.8%)	28 (23.9%)	28 (24.0%)	32 (27.4%)	3.31	1.28
Men should remarry quickly after their spouse's death	12 (10.3%)	14 (12.0%)	31 (26.5%)	28 (24.0%)	32 (27.4%)	3.40	1.26
Men are expected to lead mourning rituals	15 (12.8%)	18 (15.4%)	29 (24.8%)	28 (24.0%)	27 (23.1%)	3.31	1.25
Men are expected to provide financially for the family	10 (8.5%)	12 (10.3%)	29 (24.8%)	32 (27.4%)	34 (29.1%)	3.61	1.23

Men are expected to maintain social appearances	12 (10.3%)	14 (12.0%)	28 (23.9%)	30 (25.6%)	33 (28.2%)	3.53	1.25
Men are expected to avoid childcare participation	18 (15.4%)	17 (14.5%)	27 (23.1%)	29 (24.8%)	26 (22.2%)	3.23	1.27
Men's grief is less socially recognized than women's	13 (11.1%)	14 (12.0%)	28 (23.9%)	31 (26.5%)	31 (26.5%)	3.44	1.24

Table 2

Gender Norms – Felt Convictions vs Community Expectations for Female Respondents

Item Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean	SD
	1	2	3	4	5		
Construct for Felt Convictions							
I feel I should wail loudly during mourning	16 (8.2%)	18 (9.3%)	50 (25.8%)	60 (30.9%)	50 (25.8%)	3.63	1.18
I feel I should observe a prolonged mourning period	20 (10.3%)	22 (11.3%)	48 (24.7%)	55 (28.4%)	49 (25.3%)	3.60	1.19
I feel I should fulfil my deceased spouse's duties	18 (9.3%)	19 (9.8%)	51 (26.3%)	58 (29.9%)	48 (24.7%)	3.59	1.17
I feel I should maintain household continuity	20 (10.3%)	18 (9.3%)	50 (25.8%)	56 (28.9%)	50 (25.8%)	3.62	1.17
I feel I should practice sexual restraint until mourning is complete	27 (13.9%)	22 (11.3%)	50 (25.8%)	52 (26.8%)	43 (22.1%)	3.43	1.25
I feel I should maintain social appearances	21 (10.8%)	19 (9.8%)	48 (24.7%)	59 (30.4%)	47 (24.2%)	3.63	1.21
I feel women's grief is more publicly recognized than men's	14 (7.2%)	17 (8.8%)	49 (25.3%)	60 (30.9%)	54 (27.8%)	3.75	1.14
Constructs for Community Expectations							
Women are expected to wail loudly during mourning	12 (6.2%)	15 (7.7%)	48 (24.7%)	58 (29.9%)	61 (31.4%)	3.72	1.16
Women are expected to observe prolonged mourning	14 (7.2%)	16 (8.2%)	47 (24.2%)	55 (28.4%)	62 (31.9%)	3.75	1.15
Women are expected to fulfil deceased spouse's duties	13 (6.7%)	15 (7.7%)	48 (24.7%)	58 (29.9%)	60 (30.9%)	3.73	1.16
Women are expected to maintain household continuity	12 (6.2%)	16 (8.2%)	49 (25.3%)	57 (29.4%)	60 (30.9%)	3.74	1.14
Women are expected to practice sexual restraint until mourning is complete	21 (10.8%)	18 (9.3%)	47 (24.2%)	55 (28.4%)	53 (27.3%)	3.57	1.21
Women are expected to maintain social appearances	15 (7.7%)	17 (8.8%)	48 (24.7%)	58 (29.9%)	56 (28.9%)	3.70	1.16
Women's grief is more publicly recognized than men's	13 (6.7%)	15 (7.7%)	48 (24.7%)	60 (30.9%)	58 (29.9%)	3.76	1.15

The data in Tables 1 and 2 reveal nuanced differences between male and female respondents regarding their personal convictions about mourning and the perceived expectations of their community. Among male respondents (n = 117), the mean scores for felt convictions ranged from 3.01 to 3.54, with the highest

scores observed for the belief that men should continue to provide financially for their family despite grief (Mean = 3.54, SD = 1.24). Other prominent convictions included the suppression of emotions (Mean = 3.08, SD = 1.26) and the perception that men's grief is less publicly recognized than women's (Mean = 3.17, SD =

1.31). These findings suggest that widowed men felt pressured to conform to traditional masculine roles even while experiencing grief, reflecting an internalization of culturally sanctioned stoicism and responsibility.

Community expectations for men were generally slightly higher than the men's own convictions, particularly in areas related to financial provision (Mean = 3.61, SD = 1.23) and maintaining social appearances (Mean = 3.53, SD = 1.25), indicating a social reinforcement of these norms that may amplify the stress experienced during bereavement. Expectations to suppress emotions and avoid childcare responsibilities were also higher in the community perspective (Means = 3.31 and 3.23, respectively), highlighting potential areas of tension between personal coping and social pressure.

Among female respondents ($n = 194$), felt convictions about mourning were notably strong, with mean scores ranging from 3.43 to 3.75. High-scoring convictions included the belief that women's grief is more publicly recognized than men's (Mean = 3.75, SD = 1.14) and the need to maintain household continuity (Mean = 3.62, SD = 1.17). These findings underscore the socialized roles of women as primary caretakers and moral custodians of the family, which continue to influence their personal mourning practices. Similarly, community expectations for women were slightly higher across most constructs, particularly regarding observing prolonged mourning (Mean = 3.75, SD = 1.15) and fulfilling the deceased spouse's duties (Mean = 3.73, SD = 1.16), reflecting the prescriptive norms that govern female behaviour after the loss of a spouse.

Comparing felt convictions to community expectations reveals both alignment and discrepancies. For both genders, community expectations often slightly exceed personal convictions, suggesting that widowed individuals may experience normative pressure that intensifies the mourning burden. Notably, men felt less socially recognized in their grief than women, which corresponds to both higher community expectations for stoicism and lower validation for male mourning. For

women, the alignment between personal and community expectations is relatively strong, indicating that societal norms and individual beliefs are largely congruent, though this may also reinforce obligations and stress during the bereavement process.

Regression Analysis for the Relationship Between Gender Norms and Grieving Outcomes

Regression analysis was employed to examine the relationship between gender norms and grieving outcomes. This approach helped determine the extent to which gender-related expectations influenced variations in spousal grief experiences.

Diagnostic Tests for Regression Analysis

Table 3 presents the regression results assessing the relationship between belief systems, operationalized as religiosity and cultural/spiritual practices, and spousal grief among widows and widowers ($n = 311$). The model explained 31% of the variance in grief outcomes ($R^2 = .31$; Adjusted $R^2 = .29$), with both predictors significantly contributing to grief experiences. Diagnostic tests confirmed that model assumptions were adequately met, enhancing the reliability of the results.

All key assumptions of multiple linear regression were satisfied, ensuring the validity and reliability of the model estimates. The residuals were approximately normally distributed ($W = .986$, $p = .178$), and scatterplots indicated linear relationships between predictors and spousal grief. Homoscedasticity was upheld, with the Breusch Pagan and White's tests showing non-significant results ($p > .05$). Multicollinearity was minimal ($VIF < 2$; tolerance $> .5$), and the Durbin-Watson statistic (≈ 2.0) verified independence of errors. The Examination of Cook's Distance and standardised residuals (within ± 3) did not reveal any influential outliers. All the results affirmed that the regression assumptions were met, rendering the model robust, credible, and appropriate for interpreting the influence of gender norms on spousal grief among the widowed individuals in Siaya County.

Table 3
Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Grieving Outcomes from Gender Norms

Predictor Variable	B	SE B	B	T	P
Felt Convictions	.41	.07	.35	5.86	<.001
Community Expectations	.33	.08	.28	4.13	<.001
Gender (1 = Female, 0 = Male)	.12	.05	.12	2.25	.025
Time Since Bereavement (Years)	-.09	.03	-.10	-2.50	.013
Household Support	-.15	.05	-.13	-2.90	.004
Age	.02	.02	.03	.90	.37
Model					Statistics:
R ² = .31, Adjusted R ² = .29, F(6, 304) = 22.8, p < .001					

The regression model explained approximately 31% of the variance in grieving outcomes ($R^2 = .31$, Adjusted $R^2 = .29$), which is a moderate effect size. This indicates that gender norms and related factors substantially explain the grieving outcomes. The model was highly significant ($F(6, 304) = 22.8$, $p < .001$), meaning the predictors jointly reliably explain grief outcomes. This can be attributed to the fact that grief is not just an emotional or psychological event, but also a socially constructed process, where cultural and gendered expectations influence how people express and cope with loss.

Felt convictions were the strongest predictor of grief ($\beta = .35$, $p < .001$). This shows that individuals with deeply rooted beliefs about gender roles tended to report higher levels of grief. This can be attributed to internalized gender scripts, as also observed by Clayton (2015), who noted that men who feel pressure to suppress emotions may struggle with unresolved grief, while women who feel obligated to conform to widowhood norms may experience greater restrictions and emotional strain. Thus, personal adherence to traditional gender roles intensifies grief by limiting emotional freedom and coping options. These findings agree with observations made by Silverman and Klass (2018), who argued that the personal meaning of the loss shapes grief not only through societal and cultural expectations surrounding bereavement. Similarly, Nwoye (2005), writing on African grief traditions, noted that cultural norms around widowhood and masculinity often dictate mourning behaviours, reinforcing emotional suppression or exaggerated endurance. In the qualitative data, one of the respondents stated: “... As a woman, people expect you to wear black clothes,

to stay indoors, to cry silently, but inside, it breaks you even more ...” This underscores how gendered expectations not only define expressions of grief but also deepen emotional burdens. From a social constructivist perspective, these convictions are shaped by cultural and social interactions that define appropriate gender behaviours. Internalized gender scripts, such as the expectation for men to suppress emotion or for women to adhere to widowhood rituals, are not innate but socially constructed.

Community expectations strongly predicted grief ($\beta = .28$, $p < .001$). Widowed persons facing cultural and social pressure about how they should behave experienced more intense grief. This can be attributed to communal enforcement of gendered mourning practices such as widow inheritance, ritual cleansing, or restrictions on social engagement that add stress to the bereavement process. When the community imposes rigid expectations, widowed persons may feel isolated or stigmatized, which worsens their grief. These findings agree with observations made by Van Dijk (2008), who noted that widowhood in many African contexts is governed by communal norms that prescribe specific roles and behaviours, often leading to psychological distress and social exclusion. Similarly, in the qualitative data, one of the respondents stated: “... People in the village said I had to be inherited, or I would bring a curse to my children. I felt helpless, like I had no say in my grief ...” (Respondent 091, farmer). This illustrates how societal pressures can transform a personal loss into a prolonged emotional and social crisis. In line with Social Constructivism Theory, these expectations are collectively created and maintained through communal discourse and ritual practices. In this case, gendered

mourning practices such as widow inheritance or ritual cleansing are socially constructed norms that individuals feel obligated to follow, often at the expense of their emotional health.

Gender was a significant predictor ($\beta = .12$, $p = .025$), with women experiencing higher grief intensity compared to men. This may be attributed to structural and social inequalities that women face, such as economic dependency on their spouses, social stigma associated with widowhood, and cultural expectations that women display prolonged mourning. Conversely, men may be socially supported to remarry quickly or resume normal life, leading to lower grief scores. These findings agree with observations made by Amadiume (1997), who argued that patriarchal traditions in African societies position widowed women as socially vulnerable, often subjecting them to discriminatory mourning practices and marginalisation. Similarly, in the qualitative data, one of the respondents stated: “... *When my husband died, I not only lost a partner, I lost my place in society. People treated me like a burden ...*” (Respondent 113, businessman). This highlights how gendered social structures amplify grief for women by embedding loss within broader patterns of disempowerment. According to social constructivism, gender is not just a biological category but a set of social meanings and expectations constructed through interaction. This framework explains why women, socialized to express prolonged mourning and depend economically on their spouses, face intensified grief.

Time since bereavement negatively predicted grief ($\beta = -.10$, $p = .013$), indicating that grief intensity tends to decrease as more years pass after the loss. This decline can be attributed to natural healing processes, as individuals gradually adjust to life without their spouse, develop coping strategies, and rebuild social or economic stability. However, the pace of this reduction is not uniform, as rigid gender norms may slow down recovery for some widowed persons. These findings agree with observations made by Stroebe and Schut (2001), whose Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement explains how adaptive oscillation between confronting and avoiding grief-related stressors supports long-term adjustment. Similarly, in the qualitative data, one of the respondents stated: “... *It has*

been two years, and though the pain is still there, I have learned to live again, but as a woman, people still expect me to act like I am grieving...” This underscores how healing is often constrained by persistent social expectations, especially for women. From a social constructivist lens, the passage of time allows individuals to renegotiate their social identity and reconstruct their meanings around loss. However, if cultural scripts regarding gender or widowhood remain rigid, this process of reconstruction may be delayed.

Household support was another significant predictor, showing a negative association with grief ($\beta = -.13$, $p = .004$). Widowed individuals who received greater emotional and practical help from household members reported lower grief levels. This can be attributed to the buffering role of close support systems, which ease daily burdens, reduce feelings of loneliness, and provide reassurance during mourning. Strong household support helps counterbalance the pressures of gender expectations, enabling healthier grieving. These findings agree with observations made by Bonanno et al. (2002), who emphasized that perceived social support significantly moderates grief outcomes by fostering emotional resilience and adaptive coping. Similarly, in the qualitative data, one of the respondents stated: “... *My older son took over many responsibilities after his father died. His support kept me going when I felt like giving up...*” Social constructivism emphasizes that meaning is co-created through relationships. Strong support systems within the household facilitate adaptive meaning-making and help reconstruct a sense of normalcy after loss.

Age was not a significant predictor of grief ($\beta = .03$, $p = .37$). This suggests that grieving outcomes are less about a person's chronological age and more about the social roles and cultural expectations tied to gender. The lack of significance may be attributed to the fact that both younger and older widowed persons are subject to gendered pressures, though the form these pressures take may differ. These findings agree with observations made by Umberson and Montez (2010), who argue that the impact of loss is more deeply influenced by relational and structural factors, such as gender, socioeconomic context, and social support, than by age alone. Similarly, in the qualitative data, one of the

respondents stated: "... I may be older, but the pain is not any less. What makes it harder is how people assume you should have moved on just because of your age..." This aligns with social constructivist thinking, which views age not as a universal determinant but as a socially constructed category. Expectations around grief may differ by age, but the impact depends on the social meanings assigned to those expectations.

Results of Hypothesis Testing

The regression model was significant (F-test, $p < .001$; $R^2 = .31$), showing that gender-related convictions and community expectations explained 31% of the variance in grief scores. The null hypothesis was rejected, confirming that gender norms significantly affect grieving outcomes. For men, grief was intensified by pressures of financial provision, emotional suppression, and low social recognition. For women, grief was shaped by both protective and burdensome norms such as household continuity buffering distress, while prolonged mourning expectations heightened it, and public recognition provided relief; hence, gender norms significantly predicted grieving outcomes, acting as both stress amplifiers and protective buffers in bereavement.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that gender-related convictions and community expectations explained 31% of the variance in grief scores (F-test, $p < .001$; $R^2 = .31$). The study therefore recommends that the Ministry of Public Service, Gender, and Affirmative Action, in collaboration with the County Government of Siaya, should upscale targeted interventions to challenge and transform adverse gender norms associated with widowhood in Siaya County.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

The authors, while preparing this work, utilized Grammarly for spell checking and grammar refinement. After using this AI tool, the authors carefully reviewed and edited the content as necessary and assume full responsibility for the publication's content.

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CRedit authorship contribution statement

Elly: Conceptualization, writing, review and editing, methodology, data curation. **Michael:** Writing – review, editing, and methodology. **Wilson:** Writing – review, editing, and methodology. **Taji:** Writing – review, editing, and methodology.

Declaration of conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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