

## CHAPTER 11

# Global Perspectives on Widowhood and Aging

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This chapter looks at widowhood from the perspectives of *variations in vulnerability* among widows, the *new cultural spaces* in which widowhood is being experienced, and the *resilience and creativity of widows*. The focus here is on four places around the world: the United States, where widows tend to be relatively well off but have differing experiences related to education, race/ethnicity, and other factors; Guatemala, where tens of thousands of women were widowed “unnaturally” during *la violencia*; India, famous or infamous for burning widows (actually very rare) and child widows (a very small proportion of widows); and sub-Saharan Africa, where AIDS has greatly increased the numbers of “unnatural” widows and the struggles of widows to survive.

Why focus on widows? What about widowers? Widowers are relatively scarce compared to widows. Women throughout the world tend to be younger than husbands, so relatively few men ever experience a spouse’s death, whereas most women are likely to be widowed. Also, women are likely to live as widows for many years, since women live longer than men and are less likely to remarry, and they are more likely than widowers to be poor. Perhaps for these reasons, less research has been done on widowers than on widows, though in both cases much of the existing research has focused on the bereavement period rather than on long-term experiences of widowhood.

Around the world the proportions of widows and widowers vary, but the pattern is the same: much higher proportions of widows than widowers among older populations (over age sixty). Widows generally fall between 40 and 60 percent of the older population, and widowers generally are under 15 percent, though China (with about one-sixth of the world’s population) is a notable exception (Table 11.1). In terms of sheer numbers, the world’s three most populous nations, China, India, and the United States, have about 16 million widowers and about 51 million widows.<sup>1</sup>

**Table 11.1**  
**Proportions of Widowed Women and Men Age 60+ in Selected Countries**

	Percent Widowed	
	Men	Women
Africa		
Egypt (1996)	11.8	65.4
Ethiopia (1994)	7.3	51.9
Nigeria (1991)	5.0	46.2
South Africa (1996)	12.2	48.6
Asia		
China (PRC)(1990)	23.5	51.4
India (1991)	11.0	54.0
Japan (2000)	9.1	38.5
Europe and North America		
Canada (2001)	9.7	37.3
France (1999)	9.9	39.8
Germany (2001)	10.5	39.0
Russia (2002)	15.6	51.5
United Kingdom (2001)	13.7	40.5
United States (2000)	11.2	38.9
Latin America		
Brazil (2000)	10.2	39.7
Mexico (2000)	14.2	41.3

*Source:* Calculations by Maria G. Cattell from United Nations Statistics Division Demographic Yearbooks (census dates in parentheses following country name).<sup>2</sup>

Not only are women around the world much more likely than men to be widowed, but as females they frequently suffer from the cumulative effects of lifelong gender inequities (Cattell 1996; Moen 2001). In most cultures, females, from infancy through old age, are less valued than males and have less access to resources such as food, education, health care, housing, employment, and pensions. Females often have less secure rights to property such as land and livestock (for a rare exception, see Indrizal, Kreager and Schröder-Butterfill this volume). They are more likely to work in informal sectors of the economy, to earn less, and to be poor. Women, more often than men, enter late life childless, yet economic inequalities make them more dependent on kin (especially their children if available). Ironically, they are also more likely to live long enough to the point of becoming frail.

Within this broad framework of female vulnerability, experiences of widowhood vary, with some widows better or worse off than others because of factors such as race/ethnicity, class, caste, education, income, and living arrangements. Variations also arise from cultural and contextual factors including war, widespread poverty, behavior expected of widows, and laws and customary practices favoring males. Even the definition of *widow* is not always clear-cut, as

among Guatemalan women whose husbands disappeared by state violence,<sup>3</sup> or African women, where questions may arise about whether they were in fact married even when they lived for many years with the late husband and had children with him. And in today's world, there are increasing numbers of "unnatural" widows—young women widowed by violence and AIDS.

With so many changes, new cultural spaces have opened up. They can be spaces in which widows experience intense poverty and powerlessness, heavy demands on their time and energy, stigma, and ostracism. Yet in those same spaces, widows are creating new lives for themselves and engaging in collective action.

### WIDOWS IN THE UNITED STATES: AN OVERVIEW

In 2003, among the nearly 36 million Americans aged sixty-five and over, 14.3 percent of men and 44.3 percent of women were widowed.<sup>4</sup> Among the "oldest old" (those aged eighty-five and over), only one-third (35 percent) of men were widowed compared to nearly all women (78 percent). These differences result from the greater age of husbands, greater longevity of women, and the fact that widows are less likely than widowers to remarry, some because there is a "shortage" of eligible males, but many for a variety of other reasons, including loyalty to the deceased husband, family issues, and a preference for their newly independent lives (Lopata 1996; van den Hoonard 2004; Youngblood 2005). Many widows move beyond grief and create meaningful and enjoyable new lives for themselves as single women (Lopata 1996).<sup>5</sup> In contrast, many widowers remarry, and remarry quickly, even within the bereavement year, the first year following the wife's death. Of widowers who remain unmarried, some settle into their grief and become social isolates, while others are more resilient and learn necessary life skills (like cooking and cleaning), and develop a reasonably satisfying life as widowers (Rubinstein 1986<sup>6</sup>; Luborsky and Rubinstein 1997; Moore and Stratton 2003). It is possible that women tend to adjust better than men following the death of a spouse because women are likely to have domestic life skills and are better at maintaining social networks, though little research has adequately dealt with these issues (Martin-Matthews and Davidson 2006).

In the United States, older women are much more likely to be widowed than older men, and are twice as likely as older men to live alone (40 percent of women, 19 percent of men), but they are only slightly more likely to live in poverty (12.5 percent of women, 7.3 percent of men).<sup>7</sup> About 72 percent of older women and men completed high school or beyond (Table 11.2).

There are significant differences within the older population by racial/ethnic categories: those with high school or higher degrees include 76.1 percent of non-Hispanic whites and 70.3 percent of Asians, but only 51.6 percent of blacks and 36.3 percent of Hispanics (these statistics are not broken down by gender). Since education, in numerous studies throughout the world, has correlated positively with higher income and standard of living, such educational

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**Table 11.2**  
**Selected Characteristics of Older Women and Men (age 65+) in the United States in 2003**

	Widowed	High School+	Living Alone	Living in Poverty
All age 65+	31.6%	71.5%	29.8%	9.9%
Women	44.3	72.0	40.0	12.5
Men	14.3	71.0	19.0	7.3

Sources: *Older Americans 2004*; He et al. 2005; Humes 2005

differentials would predict that more black and Hispanic women live in poverty than white and Asian women, which is indeed the case (Table 11.3).

When a person is widowed, household income tends to drop, so older people who live alone are more likely to live in poverty than those living with a spouse. In 2003, only 5 percent of all older women and men living with a spouse were poor compared to 19 percent of those living alone. But in 2002, about 25 percent of black and Hispanic women were living in poverty compared to about 10 percent of white and Asian women, even though many of the latter lived alone (Table 11.3). These differences arise from lifelong economic disadvantages such as lower wages and less accumulation of material assets including Social Security and other pensions (Angel, Jiménez and Angel 2007).

The death of a spouse is an emotionally difficult experience for most people, and widows often experience changes in their social networks such as becoming marginal to the social world of couples (van den Hoonaard 1994; Youngblood 2005). But becoming a widow does not turn American women into social outcasts or second-class citizens, as can happen in some cultural settings. Many women's incomes drop when their husbands die, but most have at least a Social Security pension and Medicare health coverage to sustain them (though this is less true of black and Hispanic women). Such assets cannot be

**Table 11.3**  
**Proportions of Older Women and Men (age 65+) in the United States Living Alone (in 2004) and Living in Poverty (2002)**

	Living Alone		Living in Poverty	
	2004		2002	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Non-Hispanic whites	41.1%	18.7%	10.1%	6.0%
Black	41.4	26.6	27.4	18.2
Asian	26.7	9.9	9.6	10.6
Hispanic (of any race)	24.8	15.7	23.0	19.8

Sources: *Older Americans 2004*; *Older Americans Update 2006*

taken away by in-laws and other kin, as occurs in many parts of the world where women (but not men) may lose property rights and access to productive resources when their spouses die. Nor have American widows had to deal with living in a war zone, like the Mayan widows described later, or in an AIDS-ravaged social system, like many African widows. Thus many widows in the United States are healthy, financially comfortable, independent-minded, even “merry,” while others struggle with problems such as low income or having to care for grandchildren.<sup>8</sup> Though there are disparities among American widows and suffering for some, most American widows enjoy a better lifestyle and have more freedom of action than widows in countries where the majority of the population lives in poverty and receives no government support, and women are subject to patriarchal rules that constrain their opportunities and actions.

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### **WIDOWS IN GUATEMALA: VIOLENCE, AMBIGUITY, AND TRANSFORMED LIVES**

In Guatemala, conflict and violence have brought an “unnatural” widowhood to many women—unnatural because many would still have their husbands had it not been for their early deaths in war. Yet many widows in Guatemala, forced by circumstances to take on new roles, have managed to build new lives, and by exploring new cultural spaces, have created new identities and communities for themselves.

During Guatemala’s thirty-six-year civil war, perhaps 150,000 to 200,000 Guatemalans (the majority being Mayan men) were murdered or disappeared, mostly by the army, though sometimes by leftist guerrillas. The number of Mayan widows increased dramatically from 1978 to 1985, the years of *la violencia* (the violence), a campaign of state terror aimed mostly at indigenous people. Today estimates of the number of “war widows” in Guatemala’s population of about 12 million range from 40,000 to 75,000. Women whose husbands were disappeared may cling to the hope that their husbands will some day return. More commonly, the husbands are known to have been killed, because the widow herself or other family or community members witnessed the murder, though the bodies were buried by the death squads in clandestine graves. In either case, widows are unable to bury their husbands’ bodies using traditional rituals, putting them in a permanent liminal state that is psychologically devastating and physically destructive, with much emotional pain and many bodily illnesses (Zur 1998; Green 1999).

These women have also experienced the collapse of the traditional Mayan system of widow support—a system of reciprocal aid and obligation founded on kin-based social relations, people’s relationship with the land and the ancestors, and a gendered division of labor in which men worked the *milpas* (land for growing corn, the staple food) and women cooked, cleaned, took care of children, and wove cloth. Widows are “both mother and father now” and have to do the work of both (Green 1999:83). Under the traditional system, a

widow's family would support her temporarily until she remarried. But that system requires having men in families. Now, because of the scarcity of men, most widows will never have the opportunity to remarry, and consequently become long-term burdens on their families. To forestall this, widows' in-laws may chase them off their husbands' land, leaving the women with little ability to feed themselves and their families. Grown children often do not have the means to help widowed mothers because they themselves are struggling to survive. Zur found that many widows reject remarriage, some because of previous negative experiences or because they (especially older women) wish to preserve the psychological ties to their husbands (1998). Older widows with children to support them have less need to remarry and more authority to refuse offers of marriage.

This situation has created new cultural spaces in which widows have redefined their identities and taken on new roles as breadwinners—though this had already happened to a degree for women whose husbands had engaged in labor migration. Widows have become heads of families, the decision makers; they have become more confident in themselves. At the same time, they have experienced accusations and social isolation from other villagers and discord among themselves, including disagreements about how widows should behave in the presence of other widows and with other villagers. But many widows have come to like their new independence, being in control of the family economy, moving into new (male) spheres, acquiring new knowledge, and having more freedom and autonomy. Some are questioning the old gender roles. The new cultural spaces opened up by the collapse of previously tight-knit communities have also led some widows to create alternative support networks and forms of community through development projects and participation in evangelical worship, both of which may help fill some of the social gaps left by *la violencia* (Green 1999). Some widows have become activists by forming or joining groups such as CONAVIGUA (National Coordination of Guatemalan Widows), which works to support widows and educate them about their rights.

While widows tend to be older, among Mayans many are relatively young. While older women have had to come to grips with a world gone radically awry from their once stable communities, younger widows (those under forty when they were widowed) have not experienced such stability. Though socialized into the same Mayan worldview as older women, younger widows have known only constant change (Zur 1998). And surely the repercussions from *la violencia* will follow them all the days of their lives. Their experiences of old age will be shaped by their memories of violence and the transformation of Mayan life ways wrought by violence. The civil war officially ended in 1996, but the violence continues. Widows are particular targets of violence, especially by village *jefes* (civil patrol chiefs) who make threats and foment discord among widows in order to strengthen their own positions of power (Zur 1998). Intimidation and rape are common. Widows may themselves be killed, especially if they join activist groups such as CONAVIGUA. Everyone continues

to live in a state of fear (Green 1999). And the perpetrators continue to live among their victims—with impunity.

### **WIDOWS IN INDIA: POVERTY, PATRIARCHY, AND THE VALUE OF SONS**

India is famous for its widows—for *sati* (*suttee* in colonial texts), immolation of a widow on her husband's funeral pyre; for child widows; for ascetic widows devoting themselves to a spiritual life, but living miserably as beggars on the streets of India. These are stereotypes that do not match the real life experiences of most Indian widows. *Sati*, always rare, was banned by the British colonial government in 1829, and today is so rare there may be only one instance in a decade (S. Lamb, personal communication). Child widows—very young girls who were married to older men (sometimes much older men)—constitute a tiny minority (0.4 percent) of India's 34 million widows (Chen 2000). Some widows, abandoned by their families, turn to begging to eke out their days, perhaps making their way to the holy cities of Vrindavan and Varanasi in northern India, where they get meager meals and sleep in leaky huts in return for six hours of daily devotional chanting.<sup>9</sup> In reality, though, few widows are outcasts. In her 1991–92 survey in seven states of India (both north and south), Martha Chen (2000) found that nearly 90 percent of the 562 widows she interviewed were living in the same village, and many in the same house, in which they had lived with their husbands. While it is true that millions of widows experience deprivation as a way of life, often it is because of preexisting and ongoing poverty (which affects a substantial proportion of India's 1.1 billion people). Being widowed in itself does not necessarily lead to impoverishment or social isolation.

Overall, variation characterizes the experiences of Indian widows, with dissimilarity deriving from differing state laws, customary laws, and local variations in actual practices (Chen 1998, 2000). Upper caste Brahmans have the tightest restrictions on widows, while many lower castes place few or no restrictions on widows. Hindus consider widows to be inauspicious because of their association with the husband's death. Female sexuality, especially among upper caste Brahmans, is regarded as powerful and dangerous, to be controlled throughout a female's lifetime successively by fathers, husbands, and sons. When Hindu women are widowed, they may undergo a social death, and the loss of their status and identity as wives, through head-shaving, wearing only plain white saris, and observing various dietary and other restrictions. However, there is a great deal of variation in these practices. For example, wearing plain white saris and dietary restrictions are practiced largely among the highest castes (often only Brahmans) and especially in West Bengal; head-shaving is almost never practiced any more (S. Lamb, personal communication). In most middle and lower caste communities, widows are permitted to remarry, although in a different kind of ceremony that is not considered a full wedding. In practice, however, many widows with children have little freedom to

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remarry because they would not be able to keep their children with them in a second marriage (Chen 2000; Lamb 2000). As widows, they have limited or no employment opportunities; some lose their property rights.<sup>10</sup> A few are accused of being witches, and some are even killed by in-laws who desire the widows' land.<sup>11</sup>

This contrasts with the experiences of Indian men, who are less likely to be widowed anyway and have no restrictions or limitations on remarriage and employment, do not lose property rights, and, since men's sexuality is openly accepted, have no stigma, restrictions, or taboos if they are widowed. But it also contrasts with the experiences of widows in India's matrilineal and Muslim communities, and in southern India (where patriarchy is less intense than in the north). These widows are more likely to live among natal kin, have secure property rights, enjoy emotional and other support—and be allowed to remarry and work outside the home. A woman's position in the life course at the time she is widowed makes a big difference. Older widows (especially if postmenopausal and thus no longer regarded as sexually dangerous) have greater authority, personal freedom, and autonomy, and are more likely to be secure in claims to land and other productive resources and support from married sons (Lamb this volume).

With a husband's death, sons become very important to a widow's well-being. A quarter of the 562 widows interviewed by Chen (2000) resided with another widow (usually a relative), 16 percent lived alone, and about half lived with married sons in living arrangements that included shared living, "adjacent living,"<sup>12</sup> and alternating among sons—though no living arrangement guaranteed access to productive resources, food, other support or care, and some widows without coresident sons received financial support from sons working away from home.<sup>13</sup> Chen, calculating "vulnerability" as mortality risk, found that everywhere in India, the most vulnerable widows (23 percent) were living alone or in households headed by persons other than adult sons (2000). Widows heading households with no coresident adult son, or living in households headed by adult sons, were moderately vulnerable (59 percent). The least vulnerable widows (18 percent) were those who headed households and had adult sons living in them.

A great deal more could be said about Indian widows, but even this brief review indicates that few match the stereotypes of immolated widows, child widows, and ascetic beggars. Rather, widows in India—like widows in many parts of the world—have varying experiences of widowhood, and all too often their struggles are embedded in cultural systems favoring males and economic systems that keep them poor.

### **WIDOWS IN AFRICA: MODERNIZING TRADITION, TRANSFORMING OLD ROLES**

In sub-Saharan Africa, about half of older women (aged sixty and above) are widows. A husband's death brings swift changes in a woman's life—emotional issues, loss of whatever support the husband provided, and the



question of remarriage. Remarriage is linked in many instances with the widow's housing and access to productive resources, especially land (Potash 1986; Cattell 2003). Land is important because the majority of Africans are farmers and grow much of their own food. In addition, widows often have dependents to support, perhaps with fewer resources than they had as wives. Some widows are even chased away from their homes by in-laws who want their land, though in many (probably most) cases widows retain rights of residence and access to land, or have alternatives such as rights with natal kin. But over the past century or so, modernization and development have wrought changes in informal support systems and the roles of widows and other older women, and women have had to be sensitive to these changes and creative in their responses.

For example, Kenda Mutongi describes how widows in Maragoli (a Kenyan Luyia community) responded to changing socioeconomic and political circumstances by using the language and gender roles intended to control them to appeal for assistance (2007). When harsh colonial policies made it difficult for children to meet their widowed mothers' needs and expectations, widows would take their "worries of the heart" to a public meeting of male elders and ask for the elders' protection. They presented themselves as dependent women and relied on cultural expectations regarding males as providers and protectors to get needed help. In the later colonial period and in the decades immediately following independence in 1963, widows turned to the courts and other legal bodies and used letter writing, lawsuits, and the new "language of citizenship" to demand their rights as citizens. In both cases, the results were mixed: sometimes the widows got the help they asked for, and sometimes not.

Precolonial Africa was home to subsistence agriculturalists and herders. Africa's incorporation into the world political economy under European colonialism involved the introduction of money, a shift to cash crops, wage labor, and labor migration, the growth of cities and slums, and intensification of poverty. Christian missionaries brought new religions and female education for "domestic virtue," designed to teach domestic skills (by Euroamerican standards) and keep girls and women in the home and submissive to men (Kyomuhendo and McIntosh 2006; Mutongi 2007). In the past half century, the continent has experienced armed conflicts, genocides, and famines resulting in widespread death, destruction, and about 15 million people displaced from their homes. Sub-Saharan Africa also carries a heavy disease burden; for example, malaria kills 3,000 Africans (mostly young children) every day and reduces productivity among adults, thus contributing to increases in poverty. In 2007, Africa was the continent hardest hit by HIV/AIDS, with an estimated 22.5 million Africans infected and about 11.4 million children orphaned by AIDS (UNAIDS 2007).

Over the past quarter century, I have observed many transformations among Samia, a Luyia community in western Kenya (Cattell 2008).<sup>14</sup> In the mid 1980s, I lived for two years in Samia. The Samia region, then and now, is rural. Roads are dirt—mud or dust, as rains come and go—and most people are farmers. In the 1980s, houses with mud walls and grass-thatch roofs were

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common. Hardly anyone had electricity. Decades of labor migration created rural-urban and international connections and brought cosmopolitan influences such as newspapers and radios to Samia, but daily concerns and activities were local and rural. Today, more homes are “modern” (brick or cement with metal roofs) and many sport antennas for TVs powered by car batteries. At night, lights twinkle here and there across once-dark hills in homesteads with solar-generated electricity. In 1984, hardly anyone had a phone; during my 2004 visit everyone was giving me cell phone numbers and e-mail addresses (you can go online via satellite in post offices and private shops). There were many other indications of the influence of the wider world, including an AIDS warning poster at the entrance to Funyula trading center (Cattell 2008). One thing that had not changed in 2004: most people were still poor.<sup>15</sup>

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**Will She? Won't She? Marrying Again—Or Not**

For a new widow, an issue that arises quickly is remarriage. Widows' freedom to make choices about remarriage varies. For Muslim women, divorce and remarriage are common throughout the life course and readily accepted, but seclusion can be an issue.<sup>16</sup> For example, among Nigeria's Muslim Hausa, younger widows are likely to remarry, reside with their new husbands, and accept seclusion. But most Hausa women have in-home businesses, and a woman in seclusion must depend on her children to carry out aspects of her business that involve leaving the house. Older widows may choose to remain single because it has business advantages—widows are not secluded. If such women do remarry, they are likely to arrange marriages that allow them either to maintain a separate residence or not be in seclusion in their marital home (Schildkrout 1986; Coles 1990). Among non-Muslims, some women choose to remain widows; others “marry” (often unwillingly) for ritual purposes only, to cleanse the pollution of death; and many are remarried (again, often unwillingly) through the levirate or widow inheritance.<sup>17</sup> The cultural rationale is that the new husband, levir or inheritor, will provide for the widow and her children—though in practice that may not happen, as women well know.

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In the past, most Samia widows were inherited, but in recent decades some women are refusing it, preferring a widow's freedom (or even a widow's burdens) to what they see as the burden of another husband. By remaining widows, these women expect to be able to manage their own households and have more autonomy. Many times their refusal to be inherited occurs in new cultural spaces opened up by saved people, born again Christians who reject many local customs—including widow inheritance—as things of *Shaitani* (Satan).<sup>18</sup> Among the saved people's targets for change are burial customs and widow inheritance. While the rationale is religious, widows who reject being inherited are also rejecting patriarchal power and a husband's domination. Age also helps. Older women, at the top rung of the kinship ladder, have the confidence of age and experience and can be leaders in the politics of gender relations, bringing saved men along with them—as these men are supportive of widows'

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rejections of inheritance. Saved people have also brought conflicts to families and communities through their elitist assumptions and separatist behavior. At times the conflicts flare up; at other times they recede—a cycle that has continued for many years. In the mid-1980s, the conflicts were strong and often were expressed publicly at funerals, such as that of Oundo, an old man who died in December 1984. The conflict centered on the inheritance of Oundo's two widows.<sup>19</sup>

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***Case 1. Witness to Revolution: Samia Widows Say No to Men***<sup>20</sup>

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Many people are gathered in the home of Oundo, who left two widows, Anna, the elder wife, who is Catholic and saved, and Elizabeth, the younger wife, who is Protestant and not saved. Mourners at Oundo's funeral are divided in their religious persuasions. The divisions are physically obvious in seating arrangements and the presence of two choirs, Catholic and Protestant. The deepest divisions, however, are not interdenominational, but between the saved and the not-saved. Everyone is waiting for *obulori*, the "witness" (speeches) that are always part of a funeral. They are waiting for the widows to say whether they will be inherited and follow traditional burial customs. The tension is palpable.

Anna, the saved senior wife, speaks first. She tells the mourners that she had eleven children with Oundo and praises him as a good man who always took care of her. She does not speak to the matters everyone is waiting to hear about, although everyone expects her, as a saved woman, to refuse the customs. Then Elizabeth, the younger wife who is not saved, says she also had eleven children with Oundo and that Oundo spoke his last words to her. Oundo told her God was coming to take him on a journey. "The Lord relieved my husband of his problems. So there is no one who can say that any person did anything to Oundo." By these words Elizabeth is saying that Oundo's death was not caused by human agency (that is, witchcraft) but by God, so no purification rituals are necessary. "The second thing," Elizabeth continues, "is that there is no one who will bring here advice of inheritance of wives. Oundo refused. I am not saved nor am I Catholic but ... I cannot break his advice."<sup>21</sup> Thus Elizabeth calls on the authority of the dead husband to support his widows' refusal of funeral customs and widow inheritance. At her words some saved people say, "Thank you, thank you," and the Catholic choir (which is mostly saved people) sings a hymn. But the not-saved people are quiet.

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The next speaker is Anjelina, sister-in-law to Anna and Elizabeth, a tough-minded woman in her sixties who refused to be inherited years ago. Anjelina is Catholic; she is saved. Anjelina recalls how she was forced to marry when she was a little girl, but says that is not how things are done today, for people have seen the light of God's new path. She condemns widow inheritance as incestuous.<sup>22</sup> The saved in the audience agree with her by clapping and shouting, "Let Jesus be praised!" The not-saved are very quiet. Anjelina continues: "I praise the Lord very much. When the inheritor comes and finds my son has brought

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me a kilo of sugar, he comes in and prepares tea for himself. And when I tell him to go out, he refuses.” There is clapping and more praise of Jesus by the saved. Anjelina says: “We thank God who has given us light. He has really given us peace.” The not-saved laugh at this, but Anjelina is undeterred: “God has made it that old women like us can control our own homes. May the Lord be praised!” Her saved colleagues echo the praises, but again, the not-saved are quiet.

Twenty years later, Anjelina remains saved—and a widow. And many women, some saved, some not, have followed the example of Anjelina and her sisters-in-law.

### *Case 2. Two Sisters-in-Law Who Refused Inheritance*

“Is widow inheritance a good thing?” I asked Pamela Silingi (age seventy-one) in 1995. “It is useless, completely useless!” she spat out. She told me that when her husband died, he left three widows. One wife was inherited symbolically by a grandson, another was inherited by a son of the husband’s brother, but Silingi, a woman who always knows her own mind, refused completely. “I have found that those who were inherited are just the same as me who was not inherited. We are all working hard and all surviving. So inheritance is useless.” Today Silingi is still working hard, still surviving—and still a widow. In 2004, Silingi’s sister-in-law Ndimu became a widow. Like Silingi, she refused to be inherited. Unlike Silingi, Ndimu was saved, so the saved people supported her decision—as did her family. Ndimu stayed in her house, caring for grandchildren and cultivating her husband’s land, until her death in October 2007.

### *Where Widows Live: Home, Home Folks, and Land Rights*

Residence is not merely a matter of having a roof over one’s head. Residence determines the people with whom a woman shares her daily social and work life, and with whom she has conflicts and emotional bonds. It figures in rights to resources such as land and labor and is important for physical and emotional security.

In matrilineal societies, husbands often live in the wife’s home—a plus for a woman as she has a stronger position with her maternal kin than among her husband’s people. Among matrilineal Akan in Ghana, younger wives live in the husband’s hometown or on his cocoa farm, but keep up lifelong ties with matrikin through gift giving and other forms of assistance. In their later years, many women (even some whose husbands are still living) return to their hometown, the village of their brothers, where they have rights in houses and farmland, and, as older women, strong positions in their matrilineages—they can even become lineage elders (Vellenga 1986; Stucki 1992). In another matrilineal society, Gwembe Tonga in Zambia, a widow’s best residential option is to live with a married son. Some still married women leave husbands to join a son. Perhaps they are anticipating challenges from in-laws to their rights to

continue to farm the husband's land after his death, especially as the recent shift from matrilineality toward patrilineality has weakened the position of older women—though increasing poverty has also played a role (Cliggett 2005).<sup>23</sup>

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Most African societies are patrilineal, with descent and property passing through and to males. Spouses usually live in the husband's home, so young wives are "strangers" with few rights and many duties. But by the time they become mothers-in-law and grandmothers, women have established themselves as persons with some authority and rights, including some rights to land. Usually the rights are to use the land, not to be outright owners, and often those rights are secured through the son or sons who are considered to be the owners.

Some reports have documented "landgrabbing," the dispossession of African widows from their land (White et al. 2002; Human Rights Watch 2003). Human Rights Watch (HRW) interviewed over 130 widows in Kenya who reported being chased from their marital homes and forced to undergo "remarriage" in the form of cleansing rituals (usually involving sexual intercourse). Awino Adipo: "I refused the ritual and then they [in-laws] physically attacked me. As a result of the attack I became blind in one eye" (p. 20). HRW reports that Kenyan legal experts and women's rights activists believe that "women's property rights abuses are widespread and increasing" (p. 6). Caroline Wanjiru: "My mother-in-law said that since my husband had died I could not stay there.... She told me to leave and took away all I had, including my clothes" (p. 23). Such anecdotal evidence conveys the anguish of the women and the resulting difficulties in supporting themselves and their children, but it is not enlightening about the extent of such abuses. Clearly some women have been dispossessed and some have suffered ritual rape or been forced to remarry—but how many or what proportion of widows have such experiences? As HRW says, these problems are "difficult to quantify" (p. 6).

In research on what happened to land whose male owners died of AIDS, Aliber et al. found little evidence of landgrabbing in more than 400 individual interviews and ten focus groups in three districts (counties) of Kenya (2004). They found many widows remaining on their late husband's land, just as I have found in Samia over the years and as Martha Chen found in India. Aliber's team found that, in spite of problems (especially stigma) associated with AIDS deaths, "most AIDS widows do not experience these challenges to their tenure status, and most of those that do are able to withstand them" (p. 155). These findings are radically at odds with the widespread perception that many widows are dispossessed of home and other property by their in-laws.

Another landgrabbing device is the use of witchcraft accusations (mentioned earlier in regard to Indian widows). Witchcraft beliefs are found everywhere in the world and throughout history. Much has been written about witchcraft in Africa as a system of beliefs to help people understand and explain events in everyday life, and to assign blame for illness, death, and other untoward events. So it is hardly surprising that witchcraft is sometimes invoked against a

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widow by in-laws eager to claim her dead husband's property. For example, in Tanzania some old widows have been accused of witchcraft and hacked to death with machetes so an in-law can seize their property (Kibuga and Dianga 2000). In Ghana, some widows are exiled to witches' villages, as described elsewhere in this volume (see BOX II.2). As in the case of the HRW report on dispossession of Kenyan widows, the dramatic horror of such occurrences brings attention to them. But such reports overlook the fact that, in Kenya and Ghana and throughout sub-Saharan Africa, most widows are not dispossessed, are not accused of being witches, and continue living with their families after the husband's death, like Ndimu, Silingi, and Florence.

### *Case 3. Florence: A Widow Succeeds on Her Own*

Florence, a saved woman widowed in 1994 when in her forties, was left with eight children to raise on her own. A hardworking farmer, she remained on her late husband's property and grew much of her own food. She also had a modest but regular cash income from employment. Her husband's parents, both saved and both opposed to widow inheritance, provided moral and spiritual support. In 1995, I asked Florence about widow inheritance. "I just chase the brothers-in-law away," she said. "Men would just eat me. They know I have a job and that is their aim. They would come and eat and contribute nothing." Her bitterness no doubt resulted from observing the experiences of other women who had been inherited and then abandoned by their "husbands." Florence carried on, seeing to it that her eight children had food and education. Now a grandmother, in 2004 Florence opened a chemist shop (pharmacy) in Funyula, the bustling trading center a few miles from her home. She remains a widow.

### **AIDS, Death and New Cultural Spaces: Old Roles Transformed**

The forces of modernization have put enormous stress on Africans and their family systems of shared social support (Weisner, Bradley and Kilbride 1997). Ideally, persons in need are supported and cared for within their families. In practice many families suffering from illness, poverty, land scarcity, and other constraints are overwhelmed in their struggles to care for all who are in need. There is just not enough—not enough money, not enough time, not enough energy—to go around. Even before AIDS, resources were limited and adults often had to make hard choices, such as paying their children's school fees *or* buying food and a blanket for a frail widowed mother. Now with many in the middle generation sick or dying of AIDS, the care of AIDS orphans often falls to grandparents, especially grandmothers<sup>24</sup> (Nhongo 2004). A critical issue here concerns shifts in family support that leave older women (many of them widows, nearly all grandmothers) with new burdens of responsibility caring for their dying adult children and orphaned grandchildren, new burdens of stigma, and new worries about who will care for them when they themselves become

too frail to work. However, media reports to the contrary, there is little evidence that extended families in Africa have rejected AIDS orphans on any scale; rather, they have taken responsibility “with remarkable generosity” (Iliffe 2006:117).

Historically, African grandmothers (who are often widows) have had important roles caring for and socializing grandchildren, including children born of premarital pregnancies (Cattell 1994a, 1997; Geissler, Alber and Whyte 2004). But the devastations of AIDS have transformed the grandmother roles of some women into sources of sorrow and stress, if not desperation, as they care for dying adult children and then find themselves the sole or chief support for orphaned grandchildren (e.g., Nyambedha, Wandibba and Aagaard-Hansen 2003). Unlike malaria victims, AIDS victims are stigmatized. Unlike malaria, which kills mostly children, the majority of AIDS deaths occur in the middle generation of working adults. So those who undertake to care for AIDS orphans must cope with stigma and the loss of the dead parent’s income and labor.

As with widow dispossession, media accounts are heartrending: the frail old widow who is the sole support of ten or twelve grandchildren and has such great difficulty feeding them that she herself skips many meals. But how common is that experience? Over half of older African women (age sixty-five and over) live in multigenerational households with adult children, and only 7 percent live alone, suggesting residential continuity for most women and that caring for grandchildren is done in extended family households (Bongaarts and Zimmer 2002). This is not to deny the extreme situations of some women. But the broader picture is that African families, and African widows, do as they have always done: they do their best to cope and, indeed, are resilient and creative even in the face of the AIDS pandemic.

## LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE

In the United States, the future offers many hopeful and creative possibilities for widows. Lifelong inequities related to gender and race/ethnicity are slowly being remedied. In the long run, the effects of improvements in social justice will make widows less vulnerable to poverty and its companions such as poor nutrition and health. There will be a generational effect on widowhood, as more and more baby boomers join the ranks of widows. Will they follow the paths of their mothers and grandmothers, many of whom were “housewives and mothers” and, as widows, continue to do many of the same things they had done as wives? Boomers tend to be better educated and have more material assets than previous generations. They have followed career paths different from their parents and already are reshaping retirement (see Cattell and Albert this volume). Boomer women are likely to be retiring from careers rather than continuing lifelong housewife roles. Will these women evolve different ways to cope with loss and develop social networks, two of the more critical issues of widowhood? Will boomer widowers, who have done more housework than their fathers, be better at self-maintenance?

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Sarah Lamb (this volume) has written about old age homes as new cultural spaces being explored by older Indians, including widows living in large urban areas. In the United States, the new cultural spaces we call retirement communities have proliferated in recent decades (though most Americans “age in place,” in the homes they were living in when they retired). Many such communities tout the security they offer and play on ideas of leisure and the golden years. Will baby boomers be more interested in retirement communities that promote livelier ideas such as “active living”? Some boomers in south-central Pennsylvania have formed a network called “Downtowners” and are working toward an intentional community in the city of Lancaster ([lancasterdowntowners.org](http://lancasterdowntowners.org)). Downtowners do not want to live in a conventional retirement community, but they do want to be part of a community. They like urban amenities and being able to walk to many destinations. Some already live in the city, and others plan to move there within a few years. They buy their own homes and live independently, but have a network of friends to call on for information, advice, and assistance, and with whom to share activities. It is too soon in this venture for many Downtowners to be widowed, but it is likely that when that happens, widows will have creative, community-oriented approaches to their lives.<sup>25</sup>

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Elsewhere, the picture is not so rosy. In Guatemala, for instance, there has been a truth commission (the Historical Clarification Commission) that issued its report in 1999, but violence continues to make “unnatural” widows, while perpetrators continue to live with impunity and even hold high government positions. The Rigoberta Menchú Tum Foundation<sup>26</sup> and other NGOs are working toward peace and reconciliation, but it will be a long struggle. In India and sub-Saharan Africa, widows face patriarchal cultures and legal systems, and poverty and disease as they struggle to achieve lives of dignity and provide for their children. Widows are being helped by their own local efforts such as Uganda’s TASO,<sup>27</sup> the Women and Law in Southern Africa Project, and the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) in India, and international efforts such as various UN agencies, the Gates Foundation, and microcredit projects like Grameen Bank. Often change comes all too slowly while individuals continue to suffer. It would be foolish to predict any immediate end to poverty, disease, and discrimination, but we most fervently hope for it.

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**NOTES**

1. These figures come from censuses in 1990 (China), 1991 (India) and 2000 (United States); if more recent data were available from China and India, it is likely the numbers would increase considerably.

2. These data were calculated from the following source: [http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/products/dyb/dybcensus/V1\\_table2.xls](http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/products/dyb/dybcensus/V1_table2.xls).

3. *Disappeared* is used as a verb in regard to the disappearance of individuals primarily through state violence; the individual’s fate usually remains unknown.

4. Statistics in this section are from *Older Americans 2004* unless otherwise stated. In the 65+ population, 75 percent of men and 43 percent of women are married; others are either divorced, never married, or widowed.



5. Similar patterns have been described for widows in Australia, Canada, and Europe (Byles, Feldman and Dobson 2007; Chambers 2005; Davidson and Fennell 2004).

6. Rubinstein's research included men living alone who were widowers, divorced, and never married.

7. Overall poverty among those aged 65+ dropped from 35 percent in 1959 to 10 percent in 2002.

8. For a recent collection of articles about widows in the United States and elsewhere, see Jenkins (2003).

9. A few, the lucky ones, are accepted into Aamar Bari (My Home), a housing complex founded by Mohini Giri, where they eat well, learn skills, and have decent shelter (Giri and Khanna n. d.).

10. Among patrilineal Hindus (80 percent of India's people), a bride leaves her natal village to live in her husband's village. Land inheritance usually is from father to sons or other male relatives (if no sons).

11. Though women rarely own land in their own names, they may have customary use rights to land and/or have it registered jointly with a son or sons. Even a young son with inheritance rights helps a widow's land claims. See Agarwal (1994) on women's property rights in India.

12. *Adjacent living*, a term coined by Drèze (1990), refers to living in the ancestral housing but separately from the rest of the family, with the separation sometimes marked by a physical barrier.

13. Of Chen's 562 widows, 62 percent had married sons. Many widows have young, unmarried sons. Drèze (1990) estimated that about 12 percent of rural Indian women were sonless.

14. Samia are a subgroup of Abaluyia, a Kenyan ethnic group (or tribe) of over 3 million people in 1999. In 1989 there were about 60,000 living in Samia Location (now Funyula Division); in 1999, there were 73,875.

15. My research among Abaluyia in Samia and also Bunyala (to the south of Samia) has focused on aging, older persons and their families, and socioeconomic and cultural changes. Methods have included informal conversations, in-depth interviews, surveys, observations of daily life (Cattell 1989, 1994b). As always, I am grateful for the invaluable help of my Luyia coresearchers, especially John Barasa "JB" Owiti of Siwongo village and Frankline Mahaga of Port Victoria and Nairobi. Special thanks to Frankie, JB, and their families for their love and hospitality over the past quarter century. Thanks also to Medical Mission Sisters (especially Sr. Marianna Hulshof), former administrators of Holy Family Hospital at Nangina, and the many pupils and staff at Nangina Girls Primary School (now St. Catherine's) who have welcomed me over the years; and to Samia officials who supported my research, particularly my old friend, Fred Wandera Oseno, Chief of Funyula Division (Samia) since 1997. Above all, *mutio muno* to the many people in Samia and Bunyala who have let me share their lives in various ways. The research was funded by the National Science Foundation (grant BNS-8306802), Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research (grant 4506), a Frederica de Laguna Fund grant from Bryn Mawr College, and private sources, including my late husband, Bob Moss.

16. Seclusion or *purdah* is the Muslim custom that wives "do not leave their homes during the day except to attend ceremonies, visit relatives, or procure medical treatment" (Schildkrout 1986:135).

17. The levirate is marriage with a man (often the husband's brother) from the deceased husband's kin group; any children born are considered to be children of the

dead man. Widow inheritance is similar, except any children born are children of the inheritor.

18. The saved movement is an outgrowth of the Revival, a religious renewal movement that originated in Rwanda in the 1930s and spread rapidly in East Africa; its influence in Samia became apparent in the 1970s (Cattell 1992). It is not a church, but rather, a charismatic movement that crosscuts denominations.

19. Polygyny (often called polygamy), the practice of a man having two or more wives, is widespread in Samia.

20. For a fuller version of this case study and more on widows' resistance, see Cattell (1992; 1997:83–85).

21. Many saved Samia are Roman Catholics who form their own support groups ("tea groups"). The church has sometimes tolerated, sometimes rejected, the saved (Cattell 1992).

22. She says: "Is there any child in this world who takes the blanket shared by his father and mother and shares that blanket [sleeps with] his mother?" The real-life referent for her metaphor of incest is the fact that a widow can be inherited by her co-wife's son, who is also her son in Samia kinship.

23. Construction of Kariba dam in 1958 led to forced relocation of Tonga from fertile river lands into areas of uncertain rainfall, which have become places of environmental degradation and extreme poverty as Tonga strive to grow their crops in an unsuitable habitat (Cliggett 2005).

24. As is true around the world, African women are the primary family caregivers.

25. My interest in Dntowners is not remote—though I am not a boomer, but am the mother of boomers. I have been a Dntowner since its inception and have not yet moved back to Lancaster (where I raised my family many years ago). This is real life meeting social science—which happened to me previously in 1995, while I was writing about widows and became a widow myself (Cattell 1997).

26. Rigoberta Menchú Tum is a Mayan activist and 1992 Nobel Peace Prize winner.

27. AIDS has provoked many grassroots responses, one of the first and best known being TASO, The Aids Support Organization, [tasouganda.org](http://tasouganda.org), founded in 1987 by an AIDS widow, Noerine Kaleeba. Through counseling and support groups, TASO teaches people to live positively with AIDS. TASO has supported over 100,000 people and become a model for many NGOs in Africa (Iliffe 2006).