

Sociocultural Factors Shaping Household Food Security Among Widows in the Bukusu and Maasai Communities In Kenya

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ABSTRACT: In many African communities, widows face entrenched sociocultural and institutional barriers that restrict their access to land, labour, and productive resources, heightening their vulnerability to food insecurity. This study examined how widowhood practices influence household food security among Bukusu and Maasai widows in rural Kenya using an embedded mixed-methods design. Data were collected from 360 widows, 35 in-depth interviews (IDIs), four focus group discussions (FGDs), and 16 key informant interviews (KIIs) across agricultural and pastoral settings. Findings show that although most widows maintained minimally adequate dietary diversity, the majority lived with chronic food stress and relied on severe coping strategies. Widowhood rituals, including seclusion, cleansing rites, and mobility restrictions, interrupted farming and income generation, while inheritance-related exclusion and land dispossession undermined production planning. The widows also faced overlapping constraints, such as labour shortages, reduced income, psychological strain, and stigma. Quantitatively, lighter ritual burdens and greater asset ownership significantly improved food consumption outcomes, while access to agricultural inputs, credit, training, and legal aid remained limited. The study concludes that widowhood practices, weak land rights, and systemic resource constraints jointly shape widows' food security. It recommends strengthening enforcement of inheritance laws, expanding widow-inclusive agricultural and financial support, and promoting culturally grounded community dialogue to address harmful practices and enhance widows' livelihood resilience.

KEYWORDS: Widowhood practices, Household food security, Land rights, Inheritance, Ritual restrictions

1. INTRODUCTION

Household food security in rural Africa is embedded in sociocultural norms that regulate access to land, labour, and productive assets. Widows, in particular, occupy a structurally vulnerable position due to gendered expectations, ritual obligations, and discriminatory inheritance practices (Human Rights Watch, 2018; Ude & Njoku, 2017; Adeyemo, 2016; Mama, 2019). Globally, there are an estimated 258 million widowed women, many of whom face heightened risks of economic exclusion, limited resource access, and persistent food insecurity (UN Women, 2021). Widowhood is therefore not merely a personal transition but a socially governed condition shaped by cultural, historical, legal, and institutional environments (Perrig-Chiello, 2019; Hines, 2023).

Across African societies, widowhood intersects with kinship systems and traditional inheritance practices that determine access to land, labour support, and social protection. Kin relations may facilitate or restrict widows' access to agricultural resources, while ritual prescriptions, including cleansing rites, seclusion, and mobility restrictions, can impose social stigma and economic dependence (Manala, 2015; Fasanmi & Ayivor, 2021; Dube, 2023). Gaps within legal and institutional systems compound these challenges by limiting widows' capacity to claim land, inherit resources, or obtain justice when dispossessed. Historical dynamics further shape contemporary widowhood experiences. Pre-colonial kinship systems often provided widows with socially recognised roles and access to clan resources, whereas colonial land titling and registration systems privileged male ownership, eroding women's customary rights (Bashir, 2023; Kодиyo, 2023; UN Women, 2020; Dillon & Voena, 2018;). The contemporary structure of land tenure in Kenya shaped heavily by colonial reforms such as the Swynnerton Plan continues to privilege male ownership and weaken women's customary rights, with lasting effects on widows' land access and inheritance security (Kодиyo, 2023; Kameri-Mbote, 2018).

Religion also mediates widowhood experiences. African traditional beliefs and Christianity may offer widows emotional support and moral belonging, yet can reinforce ritual expectations and gender hierarchies unless interpreted through lenses of justice and compassion (Manala, 2015; Wekesa & Ahaya, 2020). At the same time, faith communities can become spaces of empowerment, where widows mobilise spiritual narratives, networks, and prayer groups to resist detrimental practices and reconstruct their

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identities (Ojore, 2017; Shoko & Danke, 2024). These cultural, historical, and religious dynamics shape food security outcomes because studies have shown that women provide 60–80% of farm labour in many development contexts (Doss et al., 2017). Widows frequently face restricted land access, reduced labour availability, exclusion from extension services, limited livestock ownership, and unequal intra-household resource allocations (FAO, 2021; WFP, 2022). In places such as Bungoma and Kajiado Counties, widows face additional barriers tied to local ecological and livelihood systems, including land scarcity, climatic stress, pastoral vulnerability, and entrenched gender norms (Wabwoba, 2021; Momanyi et al., 2021; Gitau, 2023).

Kenya's legal and policy frameworks, including the Constitution (2010), National Land Policy (2009), Matrimonial Property Act (2013), Community Land Act (2016), Kenya National Policy on Gender and Development (2019), and Food and Nutrition Security Policy (2011; revised 2018), provide strong normative commitments to gender equality, land rights, and the right to food. These frameworks align with regional and global instruments such as CAADP, Agenda 2063, CEDAW, and the Maputo Protocol (2003). Despite these protections, widows continue to face severe vulnerabilities due to weak enforcement of statutory rights, low legal literacy, contradictions between customary and statutory norms, limited institutional coordination, and the absence of widow-specific targeting in agricultural, gender, and social protection programmes (Gitahi, 2025; Kameri-Mbote et al., 2018; UN Women, 2020).

1.1 Problem Statement

Despite progressive legal and policy commitments, widows in Kenya remain disproportionately food insecure due to the interlocking effects of socio-cultural widowhood practices, discriminatory inheritance systems, and institutional shortcomings. Harmful practices including cleansing rituals, coerced remarriage, seclusion, and property grabbing continue to undermine widows' access to land and productive assets despite statutory guarantees of equality (Wekesa & Ahaya, 2020; Akinyi, 2023). Legal pluralism, patriarchal kinship structures, and weak enforcement mechanisms enable customary norms to supersede formal laws, limiting widows' ability to claim land or obtain justice when dispossessed (Kameri-Mbote et al., 2018; Gitahi, 2025).

At the same time, widows experience high levels of food insecurity due to their exclusion from agricultural extension services, livestock decision-making, financial services, and social protection programmes (Nnoko, 2020; FAO, 2021; WFP, 2022). While existing research offers details about individual aspects of widowhood, such as inheritance disputes or widow stigma, few studies holistically examine how socio-cultural rituals, symbolic meanings, and institutional structures intersect to shape household food security across different cultural contexts (Ojore, 2017; Momanyi et al., 2021; Makanga, 2022).

This knowledge gap is particularly evident when comparing agrarian and pastoral communities, where cultural practices, ecological systems, and livelihood strategies differ significantly. Without such evidence, policies and interventions risk overlooking the root causes of widows' food insecurity. This study therefore investigated how socio-cultural widowhood practices influence household food security among widows in the Bukusu and Maasai communities of Bungoma and Kajiado Counties.

1.2 Research Objectives

The broad objective of the study was to investigate the effects of socio-cultural dynamics of widowhood practices on household food security among the Bukusu and Maasai communities in Webuye West and Kajiado West Sub-counties, Kenya.

The specific objectives were to:

1. Examine the socio-cultural practices related to widowhood and their effects on household food security within the Bukusu and Maasai communities in Webuye West and Kajiado West Sub-Counties, Kenya.
2. Assess the effects of widowhood practices on food production activities within the Bukusu and Maasai communities in Webuye West and Kajiado West Sub-Counties, Kenya.
3. Analyse the structural and institutional factors that influence widows' access to essential resources for household food security in the Maasai and Bukusu communities of Webuye West and Kajiado West Sub-Counties, Kenya.
4. Recommend targeted interventions and measures to enhance household food security for widows in the Bukusu and Maasai communities of Webuye West and Kajiado West Sub-Counties, Kenya, based on the study's findings.

1.3 Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do socio-cultural widowhood practices influence household food security among widows?
2. In what ways do widowhood practices affect widows' food production activities?
3. Which structural and institutional factors shape widows' access to resources required for food security?
4. What context-specific strategies can strengthen household food security among widows?

1.4 Research Hypothesis

1. H₀: Widowhood-related socio-cultural practices (inheritance abuse, ritual burden, production constraints, and access to resources and assets) have no significant influence on household food security among widows in Webuye West and Kajiado West Sub-Counties.

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2. H₁: Widowhood-related socio-cultural practices (inheritance abuse, ritual burden, production constraints, and access to resources and assets) significantly influence household food security among widows in Webuye West and Kajiado West Sub-Counties.

2 CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

This study used an integrated theoretical framework that included African feminism (the Nego-Feminism lens), symbolic interactionism, social systems theory, and empowerment theory. African feminism established the intellectual foundation by demonstrating how relational identities, communal connections, and cultural history impact the agency of African women (Mama, 2019; Steady, 2011; Oduyoye, 2019). Within this practice, Nego-feminism served as the primary lens, emphasising negotiation, discussion, and culturally informed techniques for widows to navigate power, kinship, and ceremonial expectations while avoiding social exclusion or harm (Nnaemeka, 2004; Brown et al., 2024; Tamale, 2020).

Symbolic interactionism investigated the production and communication of meanings connected with widowhood, such as impurity, danger, or dependency, using rituals, everyday encounters, and communal narratives. These symbolic meanings shape widows' access to employment, land, and social assistance. Social Systems Theory situates widows inside interrelated institutional and cultural systems, including the family, clan, religion, markets, and state agencies, explaining how these systems' interactions impact access to resources, feedback mechanisms, and household resilience. Empowerment theory strengthens the framework by focusing on how widows create agencies, improve their psychological well-being, gain access to resources, and activate collective action through savings clubs, cooperatives, church associations, and advocacy networks.

These theories provide a comprehensive analytical lens that links socio-cultural practices, symbolic meanings, structural conditions, and individual and group agency to household food security outcomes. They directed the development of research topics, the study design, and the interpretation of results. This integrated background and theoretical orientation set the stage for the methodological approach described in the next section.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Study Design

This study employed an embedded mixed-methods design that integrated a descriptive cross-sectional household survey with a qualitatively dominant strand. The qualitative component was analysed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which enabled an in-depth exploration of widows lived experiences and the meanings they attach to widowhood practices, land relations, resource access, and food security. The quantitative survey complemented the qualitative findings by generating empirical evidence on the prevalence and distribution of widowhood practices, patterns of food security, and structural constraints across the study sites.

3.2 Study Setting

The study was conducted in two rural sub-counties in Kenya: Webuye West in Bungoma County and Kajiado West in Kajiado County. These sites were purposively selected to reflect contrasting socio-cultural and livelihood contexts. Webuye West Sub County in Bungoma County, is located in western Kenya and is predominantly inhabited by the Bukusu, a subgroup of the Luhya. Livelihoods are largely based on smallholder mixed farming (maize, beans, bananas, vegetables) under rainfed conditions (Bungoma CIDP, 2023). Kajiado West Sub County in Kajiado County, lies in the southern Rift Valley and is predominantly inhabited by the Maasai. Livelihoods centre on pastoralism with cattle, goats, and sheep but are increasingly affected by recurrent drought, rangeland degradation, and livestock disease (Kajiado CIDP, 2023).

3.3 Study Population and Sampling

3.3.1 Target and Accessible Population

The target population comprised widows aged 20 years and above residing in Webuye West (Bungoma) and Kajiado West (Kajiado) who had experienced socio-cultural widowhood practices. Widows constituted the principal unit of analysis owing to their unique social and economic vulnerabilities, such as land dispossession, limited access to productive resources, reliance on extended family networks, and an increased risk of food insecurity. Supplementary participants, including chiefs, elders, religious leaders, agricultural and social development officers, and leaders of widow groups, were included as key informants to provide institutional and community perspectives.

3.3.2 Sample Size and Quantitative Sampling Procedures

The sampling frame comprised all registered widows in Webuye West Sub-County (Bungoma) and Kajiado West Sub-County (Kajiado). Lists were compiled with the support of local administrators, chiefs, assistant chiefs, and village elders who maintain informal but regularly updated community records. These were cross-verified with leaders of widow support groups and women's CBOs to improve completeness and accuracy. The consolidated lists identified approximately 1,600 widows in Webuye West and 300 in Kajiado West, giving a total sampling frame of 1,900 widows. Using Yamane's formula for sample size

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determination (Figure1), the required sample size was calculated as 330 widows. The minimum sample size for the survey was calculated using Yamane's formula at a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error, resulting in 330 widows.

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Figure 1: Yamane Formula for Sample Size Calculation (Adam,2020)

Where:

n = sample size

N = population size = 1900 widows

e = margin of error = 0.05 (for a 95% confidence level)

Substituting into the formula:

$$\begin{aligned} n &= 1900 / (1 + 1900(0.05)^2) \\ &= 1900 / (1 + 1900 \times 0.0025) \\ &= 1900 / (1 + 4.75) \\ &= 1900 / 5.75 \\ &\approx 330.43 \end{aligned}$$

To ensure fair and proportional representation from each site, the sample was allocated according to each sub county's share of the total widow population (1900). This proportional allocation ensured that 65% of the sample came from Webuye West and 35% from Kajiado West, reflecting their relative population sizes. To preserve representativeness while enhancing statistical power and subgroup analysis, the sample was expanded from 330 to 360 widows. The original proportional allocation (65% in Webuye West and 35% in Kajiado West) was maintained to ensure consistency, resulting in 237 respondents in Webuye West and 123 in Kajiado West. This approach preserved the population-based weighting while providing sufficient cases for reliable inferential analysis in both counties as suggested by Creswell (2018).

A multistage sampling strategy was then used where the two sub-counties were purposively selected to represent agricultural and pastoral contexts; specific wards were identified in consultation with local authorities; and within these clusters, widowed households were selected through simple random sampling to ensure equal probability of selection.

3.3.4 Qualitative Sampling

Qualitative participants were purposively selected to capture diverse widowhood experiences across age, duration of widowhood, livelihood type, and exposure to cultural practices. Key informants were included based on their roles in community leadership, land governance, service delivery, and widow support structures.

3.3.5 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Widows were eligible for inclusion if they were at least 20 years old, had lived in the study area for a minimum of one year, had been widowed for at least one year, and provided informed consent to participate. Women who were divorced, separated, or remarried, widows below 20 years of age, and individuals unable to participate due to severe illness or disability were excluded from the study.

3.4 Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected using multiple complementary instruments to capture the breadth and depth of the widows' experiences. A structured household survey administered to 360 widows gathered information on socio-demographic characteristics, widowhood practices, livelihood activities, and household food security indicators, including the Food Consumption Score (FCS). Semi-structured IDIs with 35 widows yielded comprehensive qualitative data regarding widowhood rituals, land access, productive resources, institutional obstacles, and food production and coping strategies. Four FGDs, two in Webuye West and two in Kajiado West, were conducted with groups of widows to explore shared cultural practices, community expectations, and collective constraints shaping food security. To complement these perspectives, 16 KIIs were held with local administrators, agricultural officers, extension workers, religious leaders, and women's group representatives, offering institutional and contextual insights into cultural norms, land governance, and programme delivery.

3.5 Data Management and Analytical Procedures

Survey data were collected using KoboCollect on mobile devices, uploaded daily, cleaned, and analysed in SPSS. Interview and focus group recordings were transcribed, translated as needed, and coded in Taguette. Qualitative analysis followed Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis with triangulation and member checking to enhance credibility. Quantitative analysis included data cleaning, recoding, and construction of composite indices on ritual burden, inheritance abuse, production constraints, resource access, and asset ownership. Descriptive statistics, non-parametric tests, correlations, chi-square tests, and ordinal logistic regression were used to examine determinants of food security. Qualitative and quantitative findings were integrated during interpretation to link statistical patterns with widows lived experiences.

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3.9 Ethical Considerations and Data Handling

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee and the national research authority. Permissions were secured from county and sub-county authorities. All participants were informed about the study's objectives, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Written or thumb-printed informed consent was obtained prior to participation and audio recording. Confidentiality was ensured through anonymisation of transcripts and datasets, secure storage of encrypted electronic files, and restricted access to data by the research team. Audio files were deleted after transcription verification, and any paper-based records were stored securely and later destroyed.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Widowhood Practices and Household Food Security

4.1.1 Widowhood rituals, mourning restrictions and food production

Widows in both communities described a wide range of widowhood rituals and mourning restrictions that directly affected their ability to produce and access food. Among the Bukusu in Webuye, cleansing rituals, ritual bathing with herbs, shaving of hair and symbolic meals were often accompanied by strict seclusion and movement restrictions. Widows reported being confined to the homestead, prohibited from going to the farm or market and barred from participating in social and economic activities until specific ceremonies were completed.

One widow narrated:

Three days after the burial, I shaved my hair as a sign of mourning. I was not allowed to bathe or change my clothes for several days, which further isolated me and affected my ability to resume normal life. I was confined to my home for about a year, awaiting the *makumbusho* (remembrance) ceremony. During this time, I could not actively engage in farming or attend social activities like weddings. (Widow 011, Webuye)

Another widow explained that she was “not allowed to go out, not even to the farm,” and that she remained indoors until the *sisinini* (shadow) ceremony, which meant that she could not tend crops or secure food for her children during this period. Others described remaining in seclusion until the *makumbusho* commemoration, sometimes for close to a year, with clear implications for missed planting seasons and reduced yields. One widow shared:

I was not allowed to go out, not even to the farm. I had to remain indoors until they performed the *sisinini* ceremony. This meant that I could not take care of my crops or get food for my children. (Widow 012, Webuye)

Among the Maasai in Kajiado, rituals were more communal and symbolic, involving livestock sacrifices, ritual shaving, and the maintenance of a ritual fire before burial. Although seclusion was generally shorter and more flexible than among the Bukusu, widows still described periods during which they were expected to remain within the homestead or refrain from certain public activities. One widow shared

When my husband died, I was the one who had to cut a branch from the Oseki tree and light the fire. It had to keep burning until the burial. That fire showed that although my husband was gone, life in the homestead had to go on. (Widow 035, Kajiado)

In both contexts, mourning and cleansing practices were framed as expressions of respect and spiritual order, but in practice, they suspended women's productive roles just when households needed the most labour and income.

Quantitatively, these experiences were reflected in the Ritual Burden Index, which captured exposure to practices such as ritual washing, seclusion, bans on farm work and mobility restrictions. The Ritual Burden Index ($\alpha = .800$) captured seven mourning restrictions, including wearing black, seclusion, prohibitions on farm work, bathing, movement, visiting others, and restrictions on remarriage. The index ranged from 0 to 7 ($M = 4.01$, $SD = 2.23$), with nearly 90% of widows reporting at least one ritual restriction and more than half reporting five or more. A Mann–Whitney U test indicated that Bukusu widows in Bungoma experienced significantly higher ritual burden than Maasai widows in Kajiado ($U = 2,018.00$, $Z = -5.62$, $p < .001$), consistent with narratives of more extended and rigid mourning periods in Webuye. The ritual burden index is summarised in Table 1, along with the inheritance abuse index.

Table 1. Ritual Burden Index and Inheritance Abuse Index among Widows

Index	Bungoma (M, SD)	Kajiado (M, SD)	Test statistic	p-value
Ritual Burden Index	4.01 (2.23)	~3.2–3.4	$U = 2,018.0$	$< .001$
Inheritance Abuse Index	0.75 (1.01)	1.08 (1.27)	$\rho = .175$	.009

Source: Field survey data (2025).

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The ordinal logistic regression confirmed that lower ritual burden was a strong positive predictor of household food security: each one-unit improvement in ritual burden increased the odds of being in a higher FCS category by 36% ($\text{Exp}(\beta) = 1.36$, $p = .001$). These findings show that widowhood rituals are not merely symbolic but have measurable consequences for food production and access.

4.1.2 Inheritance, property control and food security

Inheritance practices and property control emerged as another critical pathway linking widowhood practices to food security. Male relatives or clan elders largely made decisions about land and livestock after a husband's death in both communities. Among the Bukusu, the *lufu* (death) ceremony marked a turning point at which household leadership and property control were reassigned. Widows described how brothers-in-law were appointed to “take care” of property and family matters, often with limited regard for the widow’s preferences. One widow shared her experience with the *lufu* ceremony:

Three days after my husband’s burial, they held a ceremony called *lufu*. Someone was called to lead the session which is called *khusena kumuse* (coordinating the deliberations). One of my brothers-in-law was chosen to be in charge of me and my family and take care of family matters going forward. He could either inherit me or just assist with responsibilities, but they said it should be by mutual agreement, not something forced. (Widow 005, Webuye)

Some widows reported that refusals to be inherited or disagreements over succession invited hostility, threats, or actual dispossession, including the loss of land and livestock. Widows without sons were particularly vulnerable to being pushed out or denied any share of property. As one widow shared:

Some widows are not given the freedom to decide whether we want to remarry or not. There is pressure from the in-laws, and if you refuse, they can become hostile, even going as far as to take away land or property. (Widow 004, Webuye)

In the Maasai context, collective land ownership meant that widows rarely held individual land rights. Their entitlement to remain on or use land depended on acceptance by the husband’s family and compliance with lineage expectations. Refusing to conform to levirate expectations or lacking male heirs, widows experienced marginalisation in decisions related to grazing, livestock sales, and the distribution of parcels for cultivation. One Maasai widow explained: “It is believed that since your husband has paid dowry for you then you belong to that family. You are therefore not allowed to get married to another family.” (Widow 030, Kajiado). A community elder elaborated: “The widow can be inherited, but it is not always about marriage. It is about keeping the family strong and making sure no outsider interferes.” (KII 14, Kajiado). These inheritance dynamics constrained widows' ability to plan production, invest in farming, or make independent decisions about resource use in both settings.

The Inheritance Abuse Index quantifies exposure to dispossession, land denial, eviction and property grabbing. The Inheritance Abuse Index ($\alpha = .741$) combined three indicators: denial of land due to absence of sons, eviction after refusing levirate inheritance, and land confiscation by in-laws. Scores ranged from 0 to 3, with higher scores indicating multiple forms of abuse. Maasai widows in Kajiado recorded higher mean levels of inheritance abuse ($M = 1.08$, $SD = 1.27$) than Bukusu widows in Bungoma ($M = 0.75$, $SD = 1.01$), reflecting more frequent experiences of land seizure and displacement. As summarised in Table 2, Spearman correlations indicate a weak but statistically significant positive association between inheritance abuse and FCS ($\rho = .175$, $p = .009$). While counterintuitive at first glance, this pattern likely reflects the fact that some widows who experienced severe dispossession were also those who mobilised coping strategies such as joining savings groups, engaging in informal trade or accessing humanitarian assistance, thus mitigating the immediate food impacts of abuse. A separate correlation between land inheritance status and FCS was weak, negative and non-significant ($\rho = -.059$, $p = .261$), underscoring that land possession alone does not guarantee food security without secure rights, inputs and supportive institutions.

4.2 Production Constraints, Livelihoods and Food Security

4.2.1 Structural and resource barriers to production

Access to land was a key constraint shaping widows’ production capacity. Among the Bukusu, widows whose dowry had not been fully paid were often denied land or treated as illegitimate wives, with in-laws taking over family land after bereavement. As one widow in Bungoma shared:

After my husband died, I did not inherit the land because he had not completed paying the dowry for me, so I was not fully recognized as his legitimate wife by the family members therefore no land was allocated to me. (Widow 007, Webuye)

Even where widows were allowed to remain on the land, they frequently lacked formal titles and were excluded from land-related decision-making forums. Among the Maasai, communal tenure systems meant that widows often resided on family land without individual claims, limiting their ability to use land as collateral or make long-term investments in productivity. Land is communally owned, and widows rarely hold individual rights of use or inheritance. Dowry practices reinforce this dependence, as

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expressed by one widow: “It is believed that since your husband has paid dowry for you, then you belong to that family. You are therefore not allowed to get married to any other family.” (Widow 010, Kajiado).

The death of a husband also generated acute labour and income constraints. The widows described an abrupt transition from shared labour to sole responsibility for farming, livestock care, household management, and caregiving. In Webuye, many worked on other people’s farms as casual labourers to buy food, even as their plots went unattended during periods of illness or exhaustion. Widows described the challenge of farming alone, often without the strength or resources to hire help: “Since the death of my husband, it has become difficult to acquire food and now I have to engage in extra casual jobs.” (Widow 020, Webuye). Another explained: “After the death of my husband, production reduced because now I work on the farm alone. Sometimes when I do not feel well, my farm goes unattended.” (Widow 002, Webuye).

In Kajiado, women struggled to manage livestock alone, especially during droughts, and often had to sell animals to meet immediate consumption needs, further eroding future income and milk availability. One widow shared:

After the death of my husband, life has now become full of struggles and challenges. Feeding my children and paying their school fees is a heavy burden, and when the dry season comes, even migrating the cattle to find pasture has become impossible.” (Widow 010, Kajiado)

Psychosocial strain compounded these pressures. Widows reported grief, anxiety, and emotional fatigue associated with bereavement, ritual obligations, conflicts with in-laws, and the burden of being the sole provider. Increased childcare and care for grandchildren or orphaned relatives further diverted time and energy away from productive work. Social stigma and exclusion were common, with widows in both counties describing how friends and neighbours withdrew, making it harder to join support groups, borrow food, or participate in labour sharing arrangements. Group membership, when attainable, provided an important buffer, but many widows were unable to afford registration fees or felt too stigmatised to join.

4.2.2 Quantitative evidence from the Production Constraint Index

These multi-layered challenges were captured in the Production Constraint Index (PCI), ($\alpha = .679$) which combined six binary indicators: increased labour burden, sole childcare responsibility, land-related issues, stigmatisation, isolation, mental health strain, and reduced household income. Scores ranged from 0 to 6. Mean PCI values were high in both counties (Bungoma: $M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.68$; Kajiado: $M = 3.93$, $SD = 1.65$), with medians of 4.00, indicating that most widows faced at least four concurrent constraints. Increased labour demands (89%), reduced income (75%), sole childcare (78%), mental health strain (57%) and land-related issues and stigma (48% each) were all widely reported. Cronbach’s alpha for the six items was 0.677, showing acceptable internal consistency for an exploratory composite measure.

The PCI had a weak negative correlation with the Food Consumption Score, which means that higher levels of strain related to production were linked to worse food security outcomes. In the ordinal logistic regression, however, the PCI was not a statistically significant independent predictor of FCS once other covariates were included. Nevertheless, the consistently high PCI values and the significance of related variables, such as income, livelihood type, age, and marital duration, highlight the structural and socio-economic pressures that underpin production constraints. The PCI is presented alongside the Asset Index in Table 2.

Table 2. Production Constraint Index and Asset Index Summary Statistics

Measure	Bungoma (M, SD)	Kajiado (M, SD)	Range	Additional notes
Production Constraint Index	3.95 (1.68)	3.93 (1.65)	0–6	High constraints across both counties
Asset Index (PCA factor score)	Higher	Lower	-	PCA explained 58.9% of total variance

Source: Field survey data (2025).

4.2.3 Asset Ownership and Economic Capacity

The Asset Index provided a complementary lens on widows’ economic capacity and livelihood resilience. Qualitative narratives showed that the loss of assets, such as land, livestock, and productive tools, following a husband’s death was a defining marker of vulnerability. Widows who lost cattle, goats or the primary family plot reported having to “start again from nothing” and relied heavily on casual labour or small, unstable trades. Those who retained modest assets, such as a small plot of land, a few cows or basic household utilities, reported greater stability and capacity to bridge food gaps.

A Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was conducted on nine asset variables to construct a composite Asset Ownership Index representing household wealth and productive capacity. Statistical tests confirmed the suitability of the data for PCA, with a KMO value above .60 and a significant Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity ($p < .001$), indicating sufficient inter-item correlations. Four components with eigenvalues greater than one were extracted, together explaining 58.9% of the total variance, and Varimax rotation was applied to enhance interpretability. The first component reflected household communication assets (radio, television, mobile

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phone); the second captured livestock and productive capacity (cows, goats); the third represented land tenure (land ownership); and the fourth indicated mobility and basic infrastructure (bicycle, solar lighting). The strongest loadings for landownership, goats, and bicycles highlight the central role of land and livestock in shaping household resilience. Collectively, these components illustrate the multidimensional nature of asset ownership among widowed households, distinguishing between domestic, productive, and land-based resources that underpin livelihood stability and food security.

The Asset Index was a significant predictor of food security in the ordinal logistic regression. A one-point increase in the asset score increased the odds of being in a higher FCS category by 58% ($\text{Exp}(\beta) = 1.58$, $p = .022$). This finding reinforces the qualitative evidence that asset retention and rebuilding, often facilitated by membership in savings groups or women's associations, enhanced widows' ability to produce or purchase food and to withstand shocks.

4.3 Structural and Institutional Determinants of Resource Access

Beyond household-level assets and constraints, widows' access to institutional support and livelihood services also shaped their food security. Qualitative findings indicated that land and property rights enforcement was weak, with many widows facing prolonged legal disputes or unenforced court decisions. Succession processes were described as time-consuming, costly and intimidating, and many widows lacked information about their legal rights. As a result, disputes were often handled informally through clan elders or local chiefs, where customary norms tended to favour male relatives. One Assistant Chief explained: "If a widow refuses to be inherited, she risks being chased away... Our culture does not allow women to sit in or witness negotiations... During disputes, women are not permitted near the land in question." (KII 010, Webuye). Another widow expressed the frustration of unenforced justice despite the court victory: "Even after I won the land case in court, when I returned home, the family told me to go and live at the chief's place. Winning the case was one thing, but implementing the judgment is another." (FGD2, Webuye). The scenario was the same among the Maasai. During the FGD, one widow shared:

After my husband died, they divided the one acre of land that I had... my in-laws drove me out, telling me I had no portion because I do not have a title deed... I do not know where to go for justice. (Widow, FGD1, Webuye West)

Widows' awareness of legal and policy frameworks protecting their rights varied significantly across counties. Of the 360 respondents, 149 widows (41.4%) reported being aware of the existence of such policies, while 211 (58.6%) were not aware. Awareness differed across counties (Table 3). In Bungoma, 36.3% of widows indicated awareness, compared with 51.2% in Kajiado. Conversely, lack of awareness was more pronounced in Bungoma (63.7%) than in Kajiado (48.8%), suggesting county-level disparities in exposure to policy information. A chi-square test of independence confirmed that the association between county and policy awareness was statistically significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 360) = 7.44$, $p = .006$, indicating that widows' likelihood of being aware of legal protections differed by county. The continuity correction ($\chi^2 = 6.84$, $p = .009$) and Fisher's Exact Test ($p = .007$) yielded similar results, demonstrating the robustness of the association.

Table 3: Awareness of Legal and Policy Frameworks Protecting Widows by County (N = 360)

Awareness of Policy Existence	Bungoma (%)	Kajiado (%)	Total (%)
Not aware	151 (63.7%)	60 (48.8%)	211 (58.6%)
Aware	86 (36.3%)	63 (51.2%)	149 (41.4%)
Total	237 (100.0%)	123 (100.0%)	360 (100.0%)

Source: Field survey data (2025).

Note. Pearson Chi-square test showed a significant association between county and policy awareness, $\chi^2(1, N = 360) = 7.44$, $p = .006$.

Among widows who were aware of the policies ($n = 149$), levels of understanding varied. Nearly half of the 73 widows (49.0%) reported being knowledgeable about the contents of these policies, while 52 (34.9%) were not knowledgeable at all. Only 2 (1.3%) described themselves as very knowledgeable; 22 (14.8%) were somewhat knowledgeable. County disaggregation indicated that among those who were knowledgeable, 50 widows (68.5%) were from Bungoma and 23 (31.5%) were from Kajiado. Although Bungoma had lower overall awareness, those who were aware tended to report more profound knowledge of policy content.

These findings suggest substantial policy literacy gaps, with some counties requiring greater awareness-raising, while others require deeper sensitisation to ensure comprehension and practical application of existing protections.

Formal support programmes, including government cash transfers, agricultural input schemes and NGO assistance, were unevenly distributed. Some widows benefited from Inua Jamii stipends or church-based aid, but many reported receiving no support at all. Widows acknowledged the government's *Inua Jamii* cash transfer as a valuable lifeline, though access was irregular and

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coverage uneven: “Some widows get *Inua Jamii*, others do not. If all received it, we would at least buy food.” (Widow 035, Webuye). While another remarked:

Sometimes it feels as though widows are invisible. We do not fit into any category of assistance; we are not orphans, not elderly, and not persons with disabilities. Even government programmes like *Inua Jamii* overlook us, as if our suffering does not qualify as vulnerability. (Widow 030, Kajiado)

Churches and community groups emerged as crucial sources of emotional support, occasional food assistance and small financial contributions, yet, these mechanisms were not designed to address structural causes of vulnerability. Those who participated valued the solidarity it brought: “The group helps us in educating other widows. It also helps us with the financial status.” (Widow 012, Webuye). Another widow remarked: “When I attend our church widow’s group, I feel like I am not alone. We pray together and encourage one another. It helps me to heal emotionally.” (Widow 010, Webuye). This was also experienced among the widows in Kajiado where one of the widows remarked: “I belong to a social support group. Here I can meet with other widows like me and discuss our issues. I do not feel isolated, lonely or discriminated against.” (Widow 032, Kajiado).

The Resource Access Index quantified widows’ access to four key livelihood-support services: agricultural inputs, credit, education and training, and legal aid. Fewer than half of the respondents had accessed any of these services. The inputs had the highest coverage (44%), followed by training (24%), credit (23%), and legal aid (23%). County-level analysis showed significant differences: widows in Bungoma were much more likely to receive agricultural inputs (57.4%) than those in Kajiado (17.9%), while widows in Kajiado reported higher access to training (36.6%) and legal aid (44.7%). Access to credit did not differ significantly by county and remained low in both settings. This pattern is summarised in Table 4.

Table 4. Access to Finance, Inputs, Training and Legal Aid among Widows

Resource type	% with access	Bungoma (%)	Kajiado (%)	χ^2	p-value
Agricultural inputs	44	57.4	17.9	51.30	< .001
Education & training	24	17.7	36.6	15.72	< .001
Credit	23	19.4	28.5	3.80	.051
Legal aid	23	11.4	44.7	51.12	< .001

Source: Field survey data (2025).

Higher Resource Access Index scores were associated with better food consumption outcomes, indicating that access to at least one form of institutional support improved food security. However, the overall low levels of access and the qualitative emphasis on irregular or short-term assistance underline the persistent institutional gaps facing widows.

4.4 Widows’ Preferred Interventions and Aspirations for Change

Qualitative analysis revealed a strong collective demand for structural, cultural, and institutional reforms to enhance widows’ food security. Widows consistently emphasised secure land rights as central to their wellbeing, describing how simplified succession procedures and representation in land committees would reduce dispossession and strengthen their autonomy. Narratives also highlighted a desire for cultural transformation that retains the supportive aspects of communal life while eliminating harmful practices such as prolonged seclusion, ritual restrictions, and coerced inheritance. Widows stressed that meaningful change requires engaging men, elders, and religious leaders as figures who hold authority in defining and enforcing cultural norms to promote gender-equitable attitudes and reduce stigma. Their aspirations reflect a vision of empowerment rooted in both individual agency and community-level dialogue, where cultural renewal and institutional accountability work together to create more just and food-secure environments for widowed women.

One widow explained: “If clans knew these rituals harm us, they would stop forcing them.” (Widow 022, Webuye). Another shared: “I wish that we could promote the good practices that support widows like supporting them with resources and discard those that oppress widows like grabbing their properties.” (Widow 030, Kajiado). Some emphasized the need for dialogue to encourage change: “Raising community awareness is essential to reduce the isolation and stigma that widows often face.” (Widow 023, Kajiado) while another widow agreed: “Men must also be taught, or change will not come.” (Widow 029, Webuye).

When asked about their preferred interventions to improve household food security, widows consistently prioritised measures that would strengthen production and resource access while also recognising the need for legal and social support. Two-thirds (66%) of all widows expressed interest in accessing agricultural inputs, such as seeds and fertiliser. Approximately half indicated interest in joining or forming support groups (49%) and Village Savings and Loan Associations (48%), while 46% wished

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to receive education and training on farming or business skills. The widows also widely valued legal aid services (40%) and participation in income-generating activity groups (31%).

Only interest in agricultural inputs differed significantly between counties. In Bungoma, where livelihoods are predominantly crop-based, 83.1% of widows expressed interest in input support, compared to 31.7% in Kajiado, $\chi^2(1, N = 360) = 94.80, p < .001$, Cramér's $V = .51$. In Kajiado, pastoral and market-orientated strategies, such as small businesses, livestock rearing, and savings groups, were described as more relevant to local conditions, although these preferences did not produce statistically significant county differences in the quantitative analysis. In both counties, widows identified group-based interventions as important platforms for mutual support, savings, credit access, and collective voice.

4.5 Food Security Status of Widow-Headed Households

Household food security was assessed using the Food Consumption Score (FCS), the Household Food Insecurity Experience Scale (HFIES) and the Reduced Coping Strategy Index (rCSI). Together, these indicators show that most widow-headed households in both study sites lived with chronic food stress, with a sizeable proportion experiencing severe deprivation.

The FCS revealed that the majority of households (73.9%) fell within the acceptable range, suggesting that most widows managed to maintain minimally adequate levels of dietary diversity and frequency. However, nearly one in four households were below this threshold: 16.9% were classified as borderline and 9.2% as poor. Diets among the borderline and poor groups were typically dominated by staples and lacked regular intake of animal proteins, fruits, pulses, and vegetables, patterns that are consistent with a heightened risk of micronutrient deficiencies and vulnerability to seasonal shocks.

The patterns at the county level were similar. In Bungoma, 9.7% of widows' households were in the poor FCS category, 16.5% were borderline and 73.8% were acceptable. In Kajiado, 8.1% were poor; 17.9% were borderline; and 74.0% were acceptable. The difference between counties was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(2) = 0.14, p = .934$, Cramér's $V = 0.02$, indicating comparable levels of dietary adequacy and vulnerability across the two contexts. The distributions are summarised in Table 5.

Experiential food insecurity, as captured by the HFIES, painted a more critical picture. In Webuye, 70% of widows reported severe food insecurity, which is typically characterised by going whole days without eating, running out of food, and reducing meal frequency. A further 25% experienced moderate insecurity, including skipping meals and reducing portion sizes, while only 5% were in the mild range; none were food secure. In Kajiado, 80% of widows were severely food insecure and 20% moderately food insecure, with no cases of mild insecurity or food security. These results indicate that while many households manage to maintain minimally acceptable FCS scores, most do so under considerable stress and anxiety, often cycling between borderline and severe food insecurity during lean periods.

The rCSI results provided additional insight into behavioural responses to constrained food access. Widows in Bungoma predominantly resorted to dietary substitution and consumption of less preferred or cheaper foods, attempting to preserve meal frequency at the expense of quality. In contrast, widows in Kajiado reported more intensive rationing strategies, including borrowing food, reducing meal sizes, restricting adult consumption in favour of children, and decreasing the number of meals per day. Mann–Whitney U tests confirmed significant county differences for four of the five strategies, with rationing behaviours more prevalent in Kajiado. Therefore, the FCS, HFIES and rCSI results highlight a dual reality: most widow-headed households maintain minimally acceptable diets but do so while facing high levels of experiential food insecurity and reliance on severe coping mechanisms, particularly in the more arid, pastoral context of Kajiado.

Table 5. Food Security Status of Widows in Bungoma and Kajiado Counties

Measure	Category / Mean	Bungoma (%)	Kajiado (%)
Food Consumption Score (FCS)	Poor	9.7	8.1
	Borderline	16.5	17.9
	Acceptable	73.8	74.0
HFIES severity	Mild	5	0
	Moderate	25	20
	Severe	70	80
rCSI (Mean, SD)	-	3.91 (2.76)	2.71 (2.99)

Source: Field survey data (2025).

4.6. Multivariate Determinants of Household Food Security

An ordinal logistic regression model was used to assess how sociocultural, economic, and institutional factors jointly influence household food security, measured through the Food Consumption Score (FCS) categories of poor, borderline, and

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acceptable. The analysis incorporated five composite indices: the Ritual Burden Index, the Inheritance Abuse Index, the Production Constraint Index, the Resource Access Index, and the Asset Index, together with key socio-demographic and livelihood covariates. The general form of the model is expressed as follows:

$$\ln[P(Y \leq j) / P(Y > j)] = \theta_j - \beta_1(\text{InheritAbuseIndex}) - \beta_2(\text{RitualBurdenIndex}) - \beta_3(\text{ProdConstraintIndex}) - \beta_4(\text{ResourceAccessIndex}) - \beta_5(\text{FAC1}_1) - \beta_6(\text{Age}) - \beta_7(\text{MaritalDuration}) - \beta_8(\text{Education}) - \beta_9(\text{Income}) - \beta_{10}(\text{County}) + \varepsilon$$

Equation 1: Ordinal Logistic Regression Model for Household Food Security

In this equation, $P(Y \leq j)$ represents the cumulative probability of being in a given or lower food-security category (*Poor*, *Borderline*, *Acceptable*); θ_j are the threshold parameters; and $\beta_1 \dots \beta_{10}$ are regression coefficients associated with the respective indices and control variables. A positive coefficient indicates increased odds of belonging to a higher food-security category, whereas a negative coefficient indicates decreased odds.

Model Fit and Assumptions

As shown in Table 6, inclusion of the predictor variables significantly improved the model fit over the intercept-only model ($\chi^2(38) = 61.254$, $p = .010$). The Goodness-of-Fit results (Pearson $\chi^2(402) = 416.268$, $p = .301$; Deviance $\chi^2(402) = 264.770$, $p = 1.000$) indicate that the model adequately represented the observed data. The Nagelkerke $R^2 = .314$ indicated that approximately 31.4 % of the variance in household food-security levels was explained by the combined effects of the predictors. Although the Test of Parallel Lines ($\chi^2(38) = 66.931$, $p = .003$) was significant thus implying that the proportional-odds assumption may not hold strictly, the model results remain interpretable since the deviation was small and the pattern of coefficients is stable across thresholds as explained by Agresti (2019, pp. 206–210). The main results are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Ordinal Logistic Regression Results Predicting Household Food Security

Predictor	β	Exp(β)	% change in odds	p-value	Interpretation
Ritual Burden Index	0.311	1.36	+36%	.001	Fewer ritual restrictions increase food security
Asset Index	0.454	1.58	+58%	.022	Higher asset ownership improves food security
Resource Access Index	0.143	1.15	+15%	.427	Positive, but not statistically significant
Inheritance Abuse Index	0.190	1.21	+21%	.408	Fewer abuses modestly improve food security
Production Constraint Index	0.026	1.03	+3%	.847	Minimal net effect in the multivariate model

Source: Field survey data (2025).

Two variables emerged as significant independent predictors. The Ritual Burden Index was positively associated with higher food security ($\beta = 0.311$, $p = .001$; $\text{Exp}(\beta) = 1.36$), meaning that each one-unit reduction in ritual restrictions increased the odds of being in a higher FCS category by 36%. The Asset Index was also a strong positive predictor ($\beta = 0.454$, $p = .022$; $\text{Exp}(\beta) = 1.58$), meaning that for every one-unit increase in asset ownership, the chances of having more food security went up by 58%. The Resource Access Index ($\text{Exp}(\beta) = 1.15$, $p = .427$), Inheritance Abuse Index ($\text{Exp}(\beta) = 1.21$, $p = .408$) and Production Constraint Index ($\text{Exp}(\beta) = 1.03$, $p = .847$) showed positive but non-significant effects once other factors were controlled.

Among the socio-demographic controls, age and marital duration were significant. Widows aged 40–49 years were more than eight times as likely as those aged 60 years and older to achieve higher food security ($\beta = 2.114$, $p = .018$; $\text{Exp}(\beta) = 8.29$), reflecting greater labour capacity and economic engagement in middle age. Shorter marital duration reduced the odds of food security ($\beta = -2.844$, $p = .012$; $\text{Exp}(\beta) = 0.06$), suggesting that long-term marriages accumulate stronger resource bases and social legitimacy that persist into widowhood. Other covariates, including education, income, household size, livelihood type, county and years widowed, were not statistically significant in the final model, though their directions were consistent with descriptive patterns.

Given the significance of the overall model and the presence of key significant predictors, the findings provide sufficient statistical evidence to reject the null hypothesis, thereby supporting the alternative hypothesis (H_1) that widowhood-related socio-cultural practices significantly influence household food security among widows in Webuye West and Kajiado West Sub-Counties. The study therefore concludes that widowhood-related socio-cultural practices significantly shape widows' capacity to attain and sustain household food security in Webuye West and Kajiado West Sub-Counties.

5. DISCUSSION

This study demonstrates that widowhood in the Bukusu and Maasai communities is not simply a personal bereavement but a deeply structural condition mediated by cultural norms, gendered power relations, and institutional shortcomings. Restrictive widowhood practices, insecure land rights, limited livelihood support, and inconsistent programme delivery collectively undermine household food security. These findings echo global and African evidence showing that widows often remain embedded in socio-cultural systems where gender, lineage, and property rights intersect to shape economic outcomes (World Widows Report, 2015; UN Women, 2021; Manala, 2015). Similar to studies in Zimbabwe, Nigeria, and other parts of Kenya, the results reinforce that widowhood is both a gendered and structural vulnerability that has direct implications for livelihoods, nutrition, and well-being (Dube, 2022; Ajayi et al., 2019; Makanga, 2022).

Overall, the results show that food security among widows in Webuye West and Kajiado West is shaped by the interplay of socio-cultural practices, production constraints, asset ownership, structural barriers and institutional support. Widowhood rituals and mourning restrictions delay or curtail women's return to farming and income generation, while inheritance abuses and insecure land rights undermine control over productive assets. High production constraint scores reveal overlapping burdens of labour, income loss, psychosocial strain, and social exclusion, all of which weaken productive capacity. Asset ownership and access to key services provide partial protection, but coverage remains limited.

The multivariate analysis indicates that the most influential levers are the reduction of restrictive ritual burdens and the strengthening of widows' asset base. Where widows are less constrained by cultural practices and have access to land, livestock and basic productive assets, they are significantly more likely to secure acceptable levels of food consumption. These patterns underscore that improving household food security for widows requires simultaneous attention to cultural norms, legal and institutional frameworks and material conditions, rather than focusing on a single dimension in isolation.

5.1 Widowhood Practices and Household Food Security

The findings show that widowhood rituals, mourning restrictions, and inheritance practices significantly shape widows' food security outcomes, reflecting broader patterns documented across sub-Saharan Africa. Prolonged seclusion, bans on farm work, and ritual cleansing, particularly pronounced among the Bukusu, directly reduced widows' capacity to engage in agricultural labour during critical planting and harvesting periods. These results mirror evidence from Nigeria and Zimbabwe, where restrictive widowhood rites undermine women's autonomy, labour supply, and well-being (Adeyemo, 2016; Dube, 2022; Shoko & Danke, 2024). Experiences shared by widows in this study, including confinement until ceremonies such as makumbusho or sisinini, demonstrate how mourning norms translate into measurable livelihood losses, consistent with FAO's assessment that harmful gender norms weaken women's agricultural participation (FAO, 2023; Doss et al., 2017).

The quantitative evidence reinforces these patterns: higher ritual burden significantly reduced the odds of acceptable food consumption, echoing global findings that gendered restrictions diminish productivity and increase vulnerability to food insecurity. These outcomes reflect African feminist critiques of patriarchal cultural prescriptions that regulate women's mobility, decision-making, and access to productive resources (Mama, 2019; Tamale, 2020).

Inheritance and property control further emerged as critical determinants of food access. Both Bukusu and Maasai widows reported dispossession, pressure to accept levirate unions, and exclusion from land decision dynamics well documented in regional studies on gendered land rights (Julius, 2025; Roberts, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2018). Higher inheritance abuse scores in Kajiado reflect the insecurity inherent in collective land tenure systems, where acceptance by lineage structures conditions widows' access to land. Such patterns align with research showing that without secure rights and autonomy, land possession alone does not translate into improved food security (Nnaji et al., 2021; Dillon & Voena, 2018).

These findings confirm that widowhood practices are not merely symbolic or cultural; they represent structural constraints that disrupt labour, restrict resource control, and deepen food insecurity patterns, as predicted by African feminist, Nego-feminist, symbolic interactionist, and social systems theory perspectives.

5.2 Land, Production Constraints, Assets, Livelihoods and Food Security

Land emerged as the most decisive structural determinant of widows' food security, consistent with regional evidence showing that insecure tenure, dispossession, and male-mediated access undermine women's autonomy and agricultural productivity (Ude & Njoku, 2017; Human Rights Watch, 2018). Although Kenya's Constitution (2010), Matrimonial Property Act (2013), and Law of Succession Act provide strong legal protections, plural legal systems and patriarchal decision-making often weaken enforcement, leaving widows dependent on male relatives or clan structures (Kameri-Mbote, 2018; Julius, 2025). The qualitative and quantitative results of this study support international research that shows that secure land rights led to more investment, better yields, and less food insecurity (Dillon & Voena, 2018; Kehinde et al., 2021; Nnaji et al., 2021). As Social Systems Theory suggests, misalignment between legal, cultural, and administrative subsystems produces enforcement gaps and weak feedback loops that perpetuate land insecurity (Filippov, 2020).

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The heavy production constraints widows faced were labour shortages, childcare burdens, exhaustion, reduced income, and stigmatisation. They mirror patterns in Mali and Kenya, where land insecurity and labour loss following a husband's death reduce long-term welfare and adaptive capacity (Van de Walle, 2013; Omondi et al., 2015). Widows' narratives of working as casual labourers while their own farms deteriorate illustrate these systemic pressures. For Maasai widows, communal tenure systems, livestock loss, and climate variability further constrained their ability to maintain production, consistent with evidence on the vulnerability of pastoral households facing drought and mobility challenges (Gitau, 2023; FAO, 2016). The Production Constraint Index results corroborate these experiences: most widows faced four or more simultaneous constraints, with high levels of labour strain, reduced income, childcare responsibility, mental health pressures, and land-related barriers. Although the PCI was not an independent predictor of FCS in a multivariate analysis, its high prevalence underscores the structural pressures embedded in widowhood, reinforcing African feminist arguments that patriarchal norms restrict women's labour, time, and agency (Mama, 2019; Tamale, 2020).

Asset ownership provided an important buffer. Widows who retained land, livestock, or basic productive tools showed greater livelihood stability, aligning with evidence that assets enhance resilience, support investment, and increase food security (Kathanya et al., 2024; Ragasa et al., 2019). The Asset Index's strong predictive power, where higher asset scores increased the odds of acceptable food consumption by 58%, reinforces the centrality of wealth retention and rebuilding, particularly through women's groups, VSLAs, and collective action platforms (Momanyi et al., 2021; Kihui, 2021).

These findings reveal how widowhood practices, resource constraints, and systemic inequities intersect to shape widows' food security, affirming theoretical perspectives from African feminism, Nego-feminism, symbolic interactionism, and social systems theory.

5.3 Structural and Institutional Determinants of Resource Access

The county-level disparities in widows' policy awareness reflect the broader socio-cultural and structural inequalities highlighted in African feminist scholarship. Patriarchal systems continue to limit women's access to legal knowledge and rights (Mama, 2019; Tamale, 2020), while empirical studies show that widows often face exclusion within both statutory and customary legal spaces (Adeyemo, 2016; Ajayi et al., 2019). Lower awareness in Bungoma aligns with such marginalisation, whereas higher awareness in Kajiado may stem from stronger community networks and NGO engagement (Momanyi et al., 2021; Kajiado CIDP, 2023–2027). Symbolic interactionism suggests that widows interpret policy information through everyday interactions with family, community leaders, and institutions (Husin et al., 2021). Cultural norms that view widowhood as a private issue, along with legal pluralism where customary norms take precedence over statutory protections, diminish widows' awareness of their rights (Bashir, 2023; Gitahi, 2025; Kameri-Mbote, 2018). Social Systems Theory further explains that differing subsystem linkages such as community leadership, gender desks, and civic education shape information flows, with stronger institutional connections evident in Kajiado (Filippov, 2020; Kajiado CIDP, 2023–2027). Consistent with Empowerment Theory, more profound knowledge among aware widows in Bungoma illustrates the importance of legal literacy for agency and challenging discriminatory norms (Joseph, 2019; Roberts, 2021).

Widows in both counties said they had trouble getting agricultural inputs, extension services, credit, or legal aid. These are resources that have been shown to improve women's productivity and food security around the world (Ragasa et al., 2019; FAO, 2021). This aligns with Kenyan analyses showing that women face systematic disadvantages in agricultural service delivery due to mobility constraints, lower literacy, and male-dominated extension systems (Kihui, 2021; Lutomia et al., 2019).

The study's regression results demonstrated that resource access had a modestly positive effect, reflecting the limited reach of county livelihood programmes. This is consistent with social protection critiques highlighting that vulnerable groups often fall outside targeting frameworks (FAO, 2016; National Social Protection Policy, 2011). Empowerment theory emphasises agency-building mechanisms, legal literacy, financial inclusion, and collective action, which many widows lack (Joseph, 2019). These results differ from optimistic national policy narratives that depict Kenya's agricultural and social protection systems as inclusive. Instead, the study reveals persistent gaps between policy text and lived practice.

Church groups, self-help associations, and VSLAs provided widows with emotional support, spiritual encouragement, and limited material assistance. These findings are consistent with studies in Kajiado and Tharaka Nithi showing that widow networks enhance resilience, confidence, and social reintegration (Momanyi et al., 2021; Kathanya et al., 2024).

However, these networks offer buffering, not transformation. While they reduce isolation, they cannot compensate for structural deficiencies in land governance, agricultural extension, and legal enforcement. This finding echoes broader evidence that informal networks cannot replace formal institutional protections, especially for structurally marginalised groups such as widows (FAO, 2023; WFP, 2022). Thus, the study both aligns with and extends existing literature by demonstrating that while community support mitigates emotional and social vulnerability, sustainable food security ultimately requires systemic change.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that policy awareness is not merely a function of the existence of legal protections but of widows' position within unequal cultural, institutional, and informational systems. Addressing these disparities requires

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interventions that combine rights sensitisation, community-level negotiation strategies, and stronger institutional accountability approaches well supported across feminist, social-systems, and empowerment literature.

5.4 Widows' Preferred Interventions and Aspirations for Change

Widows' calls for secure land rights, simplified succession processes, and meaningful representation in land governance resonate strongly with evidence that land is central to women's autonomy, agricultural investment, and food security (Dillon & Voena, 2018; Nnaji et al., 2021; Roberts, 2021). Their emphasis on structural reforms reflects long-standing concerns in African feminist thought that patriarchal and customary systems undermine widows' control over productive resources (Mama, 2019; Tamale, 2020; Adeyemo, 2016). Experiences of dispossession and procedural barriers described in this study align with broader findings that legal pluralism and weak enforcement often negate the protections afforded under Kenya's Constitution and succession laws (Gitahi, 2025; Kamari-Mbote, 2018).

Widows' aspirations for cultural change, particularly the discontinuation of harmful rites such as prolonged seclusion and coerced inheritance, echo empirical studies across sub-Saharan Africa documenting the psychological, economic, and health impacts of widowhood rituals (Ajayi et al., 2019; Dube, 2022; Shoko & Danke, 2024). Their insistence on engaging men, elders, and religious leaders reflects Nego-feminism's emphasis on community-level negotiation to transform gender norms (Nnaemeka, 2004; Browne et al., 2024). Symbolic interactionism further explains that such actors shape widows' social identities and influence the meanings attached to widowhood practices (Husin et al., 2021), making them critical partners in cultural renewal.

The high demand for agricultural inputs, training, group membership, and financial services aligns with evidence that women's participation in VSLAs, cooperatives, and extension programmes improves access to credit, information, and food security outcomes (Ragasa et al., 2019; FAO, 2023). The significant county difference in interest in crop inputs corresponds with ecological and livelihood variations: the crop-dominant Bungoma prioritises seeds and fertiliser, while Kajiado's pastoral and enterprise-oriented strategies reflect arid-land livelihood systems (Gitau, 2023; Omondi et al., 2015). Widows' preference for group-based interventions supports research that stresses the importance of collective action for resilience, bargaining power, and empowerment (Momanyi et al., 2021; Katheranya et al., 2024). Widows' preferred interventions indicate a comprehensive model of transformation that amalgamates legal empowerment, cultural negotiation, and livelihood support to improve food security.

5.5 Food Security Among Widow-Headed Households.

The food security patterns observed among widow-headed households reflect broader regional and gendered vulnerabilities highlighted in the literature. Although most widows achieved acceptable FCS thresholds, their reliance on staple-heavy diets with limited micronutrient-rich foods mirrors national evidence that women in agrifood systems often face structural constraints that restrict dietary diversity (FAO, 2023; Doss et al., 2017). The high levels of experiential food insecurity captured by the HFIES (70%–80%) across both counties align with findings that widows are disproportionately exposed to hunger due to limited land access, reduced labour capacity, and social marginalisation (Adeyemo, 2016; Fasanmi & Ayivor, 2021).

The absence of significant county differences in FCS suggests uniformly fragile dietary adequacy, despite differing ecological and livelihood systems. However, the more severe coping reported in Kajiado is consistent with the heightened climate and livelihood pressures faced by pastoral households in arid and semi-arid lands (Gitau, 2023; Omondi et al., 2015). These rationing behaviours, including skipping meals, reducing portions, and prioritising children, are typical in chronically stressed households and reflect limited resilience buffers (FAO, 2016; WFP, 2022).

Overall, the convergence of quantitative indicators underscores a dual reality: widows maintain minimally acceptable diets but do so under significant strain, cycling between borderline and severe insecurity during lean periods. These findings reinforce arguments from African feminist and empowerment perspectives that without secure resources, supportive institutions, and gender-responsive livelihoods, widows remain disproportionately vulnerable to food and nutrition insecurity (Tamale, 2020; Joseph, 2019; Roberts, 2021).

These findings directly address the study's research questions on how widowhood practices and structural conditions influence food security in households. The combination of acceptable FCS scores and extremely high HFIES severity demonstrates that widows' food security is not determined by consumption alone but by the socio-cultural, economic, and institutional constraints embedded in their daily lives, which are highlighted in research questions (RQ) 1 and 2. The severe coping strategies, particularly in Kajiado, illustrate how limited land access, labour shortages, and weak social protection systems translate into chronic vulnerability, aligning with the study's expectation that structural and cultural factors significantly influence food access and utilisation. The results also support the mixed-methods hypothesis that widows experience high food insecurity despite participating in food production, reinforcing literature on gendered resource exclusion and resilience gaps. Thus, the food security outcomes provide empirical confirmation of the pathways identified in the RQs, illustrating the importance of culturally grounded and gender-responsive interventions.

Ultimately, these findings provide a coherent picture of the socio-cultural, structural, and institutional factors shaping widows' livelihoods, and they form the basis for the conclusions below.

6 CONCLUSIONS

The study draws four key conclusions about widowhood behaviours and food insecurity in the Bukusu and Maasai communities:

1. Widowhood rituals, such as seclusion, cleansing rites, mobility restrictions, and coerced inheritance, emerged as significant social determinants of food security. Lighter ritual burdens were strongly associated with improved dietary outcomes, highlighting how cultural practices directly influence widows' capacity to resume production and secure food for their households.
2. Widows face overlapping production constraints, including labour shortages, reduced income, psychological distress, and social stigma that collectively diminish their ability to cultivate land and sustain livelihoods. These pressures contribute to chronic food stress and reduced resilience to seasonal and economic shocks.
3. Weak enforcement of land and inheritance laws and limited access to agricultural inputs, credit, extension services, and legal aid continue to undermine widows' economic security. Although resource access improves food outcomes, support remains uneven and insufficient, particularly in pastoral contexts like Kajiado West.
4. Widows prioritise secure land rights, simpler succession procedures, and greater representation in local decision-making forums. They also favoured culturally grounded reforms of harmful practices and advocated for engaging elders, religious leaders, and men in transforming gender norms and reducing stigma.

Key takeaway

Household food security for widows is not merely a matter of economic capacity but is fundamentally shaped by cultural norms, institutional responsiveness, and the distribution of power within households and communities. Transforming widowhood from a site of vulnerability to one of agency requires coordinated cultural, legal, and livelihood interventions.

7 RECOMMENDATIONS

The study's findings emphasise the need to implement multi-level, culturally responsive, and institutionally grounded interventions to strengthen widows' food security in the Bukusu and Maasai communities. Four key recommendations emerge from the conclusions aligned with the study's research questions.

First, harmful widowhood practices should be addressed through community-led dialogue that engages elders, religious leaders, and male relatives as central actors in reforming ritual restrictions such as seclusion, cleansing rites, and coerced inheritance. County governments and civil society organisations should endorse culturally sensitive rights-awareness initiatives that promote non-harmful alternatives and maintain positive communal support.

Second, widows' productive capacities must be strengthened through targeted livelihood interventions that address labour gaps, income loss, and psychological strain. This includes the provision of appropriate farm tools, drought-tolerant inputs, small livestock, labour sharing arrangements, and integrated psychosocial support to enhance widows' ability to maintain food production and diversify livelihoods.

Third, institutional access and enforcement mechanisms require substantial reinforcement. National and county governments should streamline succession procedures, strengthen implementation of land and inheritance laws, and expand the reach of agricultural extension, credit, training, and legal aid services. Widows should be formally integrated as a target group within agricultural, gender, and social protection programmes to ensure equitable access to essential services.

Finally, sustainable food security interventions must be context-specific and culturally grounded. We should actively support widows' participation in land committees, local governance forums, VSLAs, and producer groups to enhance their agency and long-term resilience. Effective programmes must combine material support with efforts to change community norms, including gender sensitivity and awareness campaigns that address both the structural barriers and cultural expectations that shape widows' lives.

Collectively, these recommendations provide a pathway for policymakers, practitioners, and community actors to create inclusive systems that promote widows' rights, strengthen their livelihoods, and advance long-term household food security.

Future research

Future research could employ longitudinal designs to trace widowhood trajectories and examine how shifts in social norms, land relations, and livelihood strategies influence food security over time. Comparative studies across ethnic groups and counties would clarify variations in cultural practices and institutional responsiveness, while panel or cohort-based quantitative work could strengthen causal understanding of links between land access, institutional support, and food and nutrition security. Mixed-methods studies that integrate nutrition outcomes with land access trajectories would further illuminate the mechanisms through which structural constraints shape widows' wellbeing. Evaluation of widow-focused livelihood, legal, and social protection interventions is also needed to generate actionable evidence for policy design, targeting, and scaling.

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