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DIMENSIONS OF CHANGE IN THE LIVELIHOODS OF RURAL  
WIDOWS AMONGST THE TAITA OF KENYA

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined the livelihoods of rural widows in a contemporary rural African society, specifically the Taita. The objectives of this survey were to investigate economic and social changes in women when they become widows in the rural Taita communities, mechanisms that the widows adopt to cope with these changes in their livelihoods and opportunities available for widows to improve their livelihoods

The survey for the study was undertaken in the month of February 2004 and utilized semi-structured interviews, key informant interviews and focus group discussions to study the changes in the lives of rural women upon the death of their husbands. It investigated the changes in income, social, productive and reproductive roles, property ownership and participation in social groups and financial institutions. It also highlighted coping mechanisms and identified opportunities that can be used to improve the overall life of widows.

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This research has shown that widowhood is a period of adversity for most women. Their strategic positions in society are lowered and this reduces their bargaining power to sustain basic livelihoods. Household incomes drop while some opt to supplement productive activities. Reproductive roles are greatly increased and social integration is less for widows. Widows are hindered by financial contributions in joining self-help groups. Assistance from their families is not assured as the economic growth is on the decline. Additionally, the informality of community support structures has ensured that they have broken down leaving the widow vulnerable to harsh alternatives such as exchanging sexual favours for assistance, selling illicit brew and drugs, borrowing on credit and back breaking work such as cutting of sisal trees. This study has shown that remarriage is not an option for many widows as any property left by the husbands is governed by patriarchal customary laws on inheritance. Government support is largely in the form of education bursaries and food relief which benefit the widows incidentally.

The majority of widows voted in the last general elections and they should therefore bargain for more support from their constituency representatives. The desk study reveals that new draft constitution shows progress in guaranteeing women's property and inheritance rights. The civil society is also engaged in providing paralegal

training and raising awareness of local administrators. However, a lot more remains to be done for the direct benefit of widows. Opportunities for widows lie mainly in their organizing themselves for change and in engaging in trade and income generation activities.

Key recommendations emerging from this survey include the paramount recognition that widows are a special social group that represents pockets of poverty within the nation. Special programs should be developed for widows particularly on poverty alleviation and ensuring adequate housing for widows. Legal and institutional reforms particularly in policies legislation and structures that prevent widows' enjoyment of their property and inheritance rights must be made.

In addition mechanisms should be developed whereby tourism revenues from the Tsavo National Park are shared with local communities. Increased NGO presence and activities in Mwatate Division would greatly assist in providing or lobbying for basic services as well as in provision of paralegal training and legal aid services to the community and public administration officials. Counseling and advisory services for widows were cited as a major need and these could be provided by faith based institutions or NGOs. Lastly community awareness on the needs of widows would greatly provide entry points for greater social integration of widows within the community.