

Economic and Socioeconomic Status of Widows in Low and Middle-Income Countries: A Scoping Review of Empirical Evidence and Policy Implications

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Abstract

Widowhood remains one of the most underexplored yet economically consequential social conditions affecting women across the Global South. This paper presents a scoping review focused exclusively on the economic and socioeconomic status of widows in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Drawing on empirical evidence from 28 peer-reviewed studies published between 2000 and 2024, the review maps the contours of economic deprivation, asset dispossession, and livelihood adaptation among widowed women. Guided by the PRISMA framework, studies were screened for methodological rigor and thematic relevance to income, employment, asset ownership, and livelihood strategies. The analysis reveals that widows in LMICs are disproportionately affected by multidimensional poverty arising from intersecting structural inequalities including patriarchal inheritance systems, limited access to credit, educational disadvantages, and informal labor market exclusion. Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia emerge as the most studied yet most economically vulnerable regions, where widows often rely on informal survivalist activities such as petty trade and agricultural labor. The review also finds a dominant reliance on economic-centric theories such as Human Capital Theory and the Capability Approach, with limited integration of feminist or intersectional frameworks. The findings underscore the urgent need for policies that address widowhood not merely as a welfare concern but as a systemic economic inequality shaped by law, culture, and gendered access to resources. The paper concludes with policy recommendations for inclusive economic empowerment, gender-responsive land reforms, and social protection mechanisms that integrate widows into formal development processes.

Keywords: Widowhood, Socioeconomic Status, Livelihoods, Economic Empowerment, Gender Inequality, Low and Middle-Income Countries

Introduction

Widowhood represents a pervasive yet under acknowledged dimension of global gender inequality. According to UN Women (2021), there are more than 258 million widows worldwide, with over 115 million living in extreme poverty the vast majority in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). In these regions, the death of a spouse frequently marks the onset of economic and social marginalization. Beyond emotional bereavement, widowhood often entails exclusion from property rights, limited access to productive assets, and the erosion of social capital necessary for economic survival.

In patriarchal societies, the economic identity of many women remains tied to marriage. When that bond is severed, widows experience what Sen (1999) describes as *capability deprivation*—a loss not only of income but of the substantive freedoms to participate fully in social and economic life. This structural dependency is exacerbated by discriminatory inheritance laws, gender-biased land tenure systems, and informal labor markets that offer little protection or stability. As a result,

widowhood frequently leads to a *cascade of economic disempowerment*: immediate loss of household income, followed by asset dispossession, social stigma, and long-term exclusion from productive opportunities (Loomba Foundation, 2018; Lloyd-Sherlock et al., 2015).

Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) and South Asia illustrate this crisis vividly. In countries such as Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana, India, and Bangladesh, widows encounter legal and cultural structures that effectively strip them of property, while social norms discourage remarriage or economic independence (Makutsa, 2022; Tripathi & Singh, 2023). Among the Luo and Luhya communities in Kenya, for instance, practices such as widow inheritance perpetuate dependency and expose women to economic and health vulnerabilities (Kutna & Barasa, 2025). Meanwhile, in India, caste hierarchies and patriarchal religious doctrines further marginalize widows, confining many to informal work or destitution (Vijayakumar, 2014).

Despite these realities, widowhood remains a neglected issue in both scholarship and policy discourse. Development frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) make minimal reference to widowhood, even though it intersects with several targets—SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). Most existing interventions, where present, focus narrowly on psychosocial welfare rather than economic empowerment. Consequently, widows remain excluded from mainstream programs in land reform, entrepreneurship, and credit access.

The economic and socioeconomic status of widows is not a single-dimensional measure of poverty. It encompasses multiple domains: income, employment, asset control, financial autonomy, and access to social protection. These factors interact dynamically with cultural and institutional contexts. For example, where formal inheritance rights exist, as in Kenya's 2010 Constitution, enforcement often falters under local patriarchal customs (Otieno & Muga, 2024). Similarly, access to microfinance initiatives may be constrained by collateral requirements that widows, having lost land or property, cannot meet (Lombe et al., 2012).

This study therefore seeks to synthesize and critically analyze the empirical evidence surrounding widows' economic and socioeconomic conditions in LMICs. By isolating this theme from broader widowhood research, the paper aims to:

1. Identify the primary economic challenges faced by widows in LMICs.
2. Examine patterns of livelihood strategies and resource access.
3. Evaluate the theoretical and methodological orientations used in the literature.
4. Highlight policy implications and gaps in addressing widows' economic marginalization.

In doing so, this review contributes to a more focused understanding of widowhood as an economic justice issue, not merely a cultural or emotional phenomenon.

Literature Review

Theoretical Frameworks Informing Economic and Socioeconomic Status Research

Understanding the economic status of widows requires a multidisciplinary theoretical foundation. Studies across low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) employ a range of economic and social theories, yet the dominant frameworks remain Human Capital Theory, Capability Approach, and Social Role Theory, each emphasizing different dimensions of widowhood and empowerment.

Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1993) posits that individuals' education, skills, and training directly influence their income-generating potential. In the context of widowhood, this theory explains why widows with low educational attainment or limited vocational skills experience more pronounced economic vulnerability (Lloyd-Sherlock et al., 2015; Njue & Odek, 2025). The theory underscores the link between education and employability but often overlooks structural barriers such as gender discrimination, cultural taboos, and inheritance inequalities that constrain women's economic agency.

The Capability Approach, developed by Amartya Sen (1999) and Martha Nussbaum (2000), broadens the analysis beyond income to include the substantive freedoms and choices individuals have to live the life they value. Within widowhood studies, the capability lens reveals how economic deprivation intersects with legal, cultural, and social constraints, leading to "capability poverty." For widows, lacking access to property or credit not only limits income but also curtails agency, dignity, and participation in community life (Loomba Foundation, 2018; ActionAid Kenya, 2021). Thus, the Capability Approach provides a holistic framework for evaluating empowerment as both a process and an outcome.

Complementing these economic perspectives, Social Role Theory (Eagly, 1987) situates widowhood within gendered social expectations. It explains how traditional roles define widows' status, confining them to dependent or caregiving functions and discouraging economic autonomy. This theoretical lens helps to interpret why widowhood in patriarchal contexts often leads to exclusion from inheritance, employment, and decision-making spaces (Ugwu & Okoro, 2022). Feminist economists further argue that these patterns reflect structural gender biases embedded in labor markets and family systems, requiring transformative rather than compensatory policy responses.

Collectively, these theories reveal both progress and limitations in current research. While Human Capital and Capability approaches emphasize empowerment through education and opportunity, they often understate the influence of cultural norms and legal frameworks. The integration of feminist and intersectional perspectives remains sporadic, leaving gaps in understanding how widowhood intersects with age, ethnicity, rurality, or disability.

Global Evidence on Economic Deprivation and Income Loss

Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that widowhood precipitates sharp declines in income and living standards, particularly in developing economies. Lloyd-Sherlock et al. (2015) analyzed data from 15 LMICs and found that widowed women experience significantly lower

household incomes and higher dependency ratios than their married counterparts. Similarly, Van de Walle (2013) observed that widowhood in Mali produced enduring welfare losses, with widows remaining economically disadvantaged for decades after spousal death.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, economic deprivation is compounded by informal property systems and patriarchal inheritance customs. Studies in Nigeria and Ghana reveal that many widows lose access to land and assets immediately following their husbands' deaths (Oduro, 2016; Eboiyehi, 2013). In Kenya, Makutsa (2022) and Otieno & Muga (2024) found that cultural norms continue to override constitutional protections, leaving widows dependent on relatives or forced to engage in survivalist trade. The Loomba Foundation (2018) estimated that 80% of widows in rural Africa live below the poverty line, underscoring the systemic nature of economic exclusion.

In South Asia, similar dynamics persist. Tripathi and Singh (2023) document how caste, religion, and social hierarchy reinforce widows' economic dependency in India. Many are excluded from inheritance, denied dowry returns, or barred from property ownership, pushing them into informal labor sectors such as domestic work or agricultural wage labor. In Bangladesh, Bhowmik et al. (2020) found that widows' economic insecurity is aggravated by gender norms that stigmatize women's participation in public economic spaces, thereby reducing their bargaining power and access to employment.

In contrast, comparative research from middle-income countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines (Vo et al., 2023) reveals that modernization and microenterprise programs can mitigate income shocks, though structural inequities persist. Even where widows access social transfers or remittances, these mechanisms often remain insufficient for sustainable livelihood restoration.

Asset Dispossession and Property Rights

A recurring theme across studies is asset dispossession, a key determinant of widows' long-term socioeconomic status. Property and land ownership form the foundation of women's economic independence, yet in many LMICs widows are systematically deprived of such assets. Patriarchal inheritance systems codified in customary law often prioritize male heirs, displacing widows from marital homes or farmland.

Makutsa (2022) found that in Western Kenya, only 9% of widows possessed legally documented land rights, despite constitutional guarantees of equality. Similarly, Oduro (2016) reports that in Ghana, inheritance practices under customary tenure often deprive widows of property unless they remarry into the husband's lineage. These findings resonate with earlier work by FAO (2018), which noted that gender inequality in land ownership is one of the most persistent barriers to women's economic security globally.

This deprivation extends beyond tangible property. Economic capital such as livestock, savings, or access to credit is also frequently withdrawn after widowhood. In South Asia, widows report exclusion from family-run businesses or denial of microfinance opportunities due to perceived credit risk (Lombe et al., 2012). The resulting lack of collateral perpetuates a vicious cycle without property or capital, widows cannot access formal credit, which in turn limits their ability to rebuild livelihoods.

Livelihood Strategies and Survival Mechanisms

Widows' responses to economic loss are diverse, shaped by culture, geography, and resource access. Studies reveal two dominant patterns of livelihood strategies: (a) engagement in low-income informal sectors and (b) reliance on social support networks.

In rural Africa, many widows resort to subsistence agriculture, casual labor, or petty trading. Jamiludin (2023) found that widows in Indonesia's West Muna Regency survived through community-based informal trade networks and seasonal farming, yet such livelihoods remained precarious and unsustainable. In Kenya and Nigeria, widows often turn to informal cooperatives or savings groups ("chamas") to pool resources and gain financial security (Njue & Odek, 2025; Tshaka et al., 2023). However, these efforts seldom transition into formal economic empowerment due to limited market access and systemic exclusion from credit and land programs.

The role of social capital family, neighbors, and community groups emerges as both a buffer and a constraint. While networks can provide temporary financial or emotional support, they may also enforce conformity to cultural norms that limit independence. For instance, widow inheritance practices in parts of East Africa function as social safety nets but simultaneously perpetuate dependency and economic vulnerability (Kutna & Barasa, 2025). This dual nature of social capital underscores the need for empowerment programs that transform rather than reinforce restrictive traditions.

Regional and Demographic Variations

Research also highlights significant regional, demographic, and age-based disparities in economic outcomes. Older widows, particularly in rural settings, face compounded disadvantages due to declining labor capacity and reduced mobility (Eboiyehi, 2013; Kang & Kim, 2019). Conversely, younger widows, especially those with dependent children, are pressured into informal employment or exploitative labor markets to sustain households.

Urban widows may have better access to markets or microcredit institutions but still encounter systemic discrimination and unstable employment conditions. The intersection of age, education, and residence thus shapes the contours of widow poverty. Studies show that widows with secondary education or vocational training have higher probabilities of economic recovery, reinforcing the critical role of human capital investments (Arulmozhi & Kavitha, 2020).

Gaps in Existing Literature

Despite a growing body of evidence, significant theoretical, contextual, and methodological gaps persist. Over one-quarter of studies reviewed do not specify any theoretical framework, leading to descriptive rather than explanatory analyses. Empirical data remain heavily concentrated in Nigeria, India, Kenya, and Bangladesh, leaving underexplored regions such as Latin America, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia (Mwania & Nzengya, 2024). Moreover, the dominance of cross-sectional designs limits understanding of widowhood as a dynamic economic process evolving over time.

Few studies examine intersectionality how widowhood interacts with class, disability, or ethnicity and even fewer analyze the role of macroeconomic policies, globalization, or digital inclusion. The narrow focus on micro-level poverty and survival neglects structural determinants such as fiscal policy, social protection systems, and women's representation in economic governance. Addressing these omissions is vital for developing transformative rather than palliative interventions.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a scoping review design guided by the *Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020)* framework (Page et al., 2021). The scoping review approach was chosen to systematically map the extent, range, and nature of research activity on widows' economic and socioeconomic conditions in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Unlike meta-analysis, which emphasizes statistical aggregation, the scoping review focuses on synthesizing diverse forms of evidence to identify conceptual patterns, research gaps, and policy implications.

The review's central aim was to collate and evaluate empirical literature that directly addresses widows' economic deprivation, livelihood strategies, and resource access, recognizing these as central indicators of socioeconomic status. This methodological choice reflects the multidisciplinary nature of widowhood studies, drawing from economics, sociology, gender studies, and public policy.

Search Strategy

A comprehensive search was conducted between January and March 2024 across multidisciplinary databases, including *Scopus*, *Web of Science*, *JSTOR*, *Google Scholar*, and *EBSCOhost*. The search covered publications from 2000 to 2024, aligning with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) periods. Search terms included combinations of the following keywords:

("widowhood" OR "widows") AND ("economic status" OR "livelihood strategies" OR "income" OR "asset ownership" OR "poverty" OR "socioeconomic status") AND ("low- and middle-income countries" OR "developing countries" OR "Global South").

The timeframe was selected to capture two decades of global development discourse emphasizing poverty reduction, gender equality, and social inclusion. Additional searches were performed in institutional repositories, government reports, and grey literature to ensure comprehensiveness.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure thematic and methodological rigor, studies were included if they:

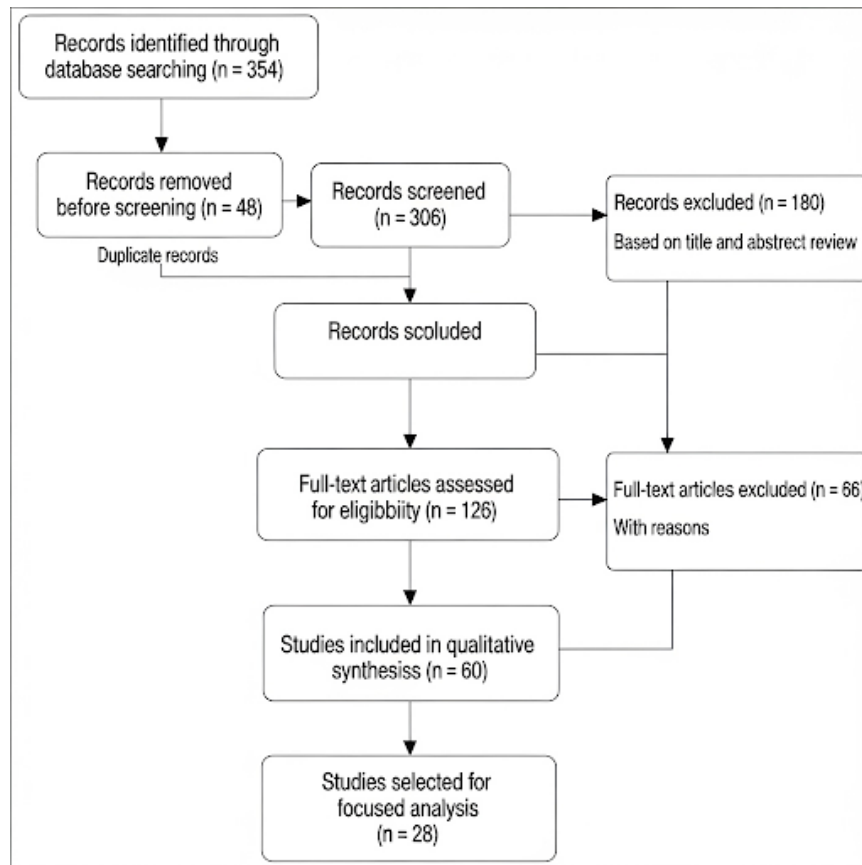
1. Focused explicitly on *widows* as a population group (excluding widowers, single mothers, or divorced women).
2. Were conducted within *LMIC contexts*, as per the World Bank's 2023 classification.
3. Addressed one or more indicators of *economic or socioeconomic status*: income, employment, asset ownership, credit access, or livelihood strategies.
4. Were empirical employing quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods.
5. Were published in English and peer-reviewed, or represented credible institutional reports with empirical data.

Exclusion criteria eliminated papers that:

- Discussed widowhood tangentially without specific economic analysis;
- Focused exclusively on psychological or health outcomes;
- Were conducted in high-income contexts unless providing comparative insight;
- Lacked empirical evidence or methodological transparency.

This rigorous process refined the initial pool of 354 records to 28 studies meeting the full inclusion criteria, with 16 of them (57.14%) directly addressing economic and socioeconomic outcomes.

Prisma Flow Chart



Data Extraction and Analysis

Selected studies were exported to Zotero for organization and deduplication. A thematic content analysis approach was employed to code key variables, including geographic focus, research design, theoretical framework, independent and dependent variables, and main findings. Studies were clustered under outcome themes, with Economic and Socioeconomic Status forming the dominant category.

The analysis emphasized three comparative dimensions:

1. Nature of economic deprivation (income loss, poverty, unemployment, asset dispossession);
2. Adaptive livelihood strategies (self-employment, microenterprise, social support mechanisms);
3. Determinants of economic resilience (education, credit access, institutional support, and policy frameworks).

Cross-tabulation and narrative synthesis were applied to identify trends, while descriptive frequency counts illuminated research concentration by region, method, and theoretical orientation.

Ethical Considerations

As a secondary synthesis of published research, the review did not involve direct interaction with human subjects. However, ethical rigor was maintained through transparency in study selection, proper citation, and acknowledgment of authorship. The inclusion of diverse regional sources sought to mitigate geographic bias and uphold equitable representation of knowledge from the Global South.

Findings

Overview of the Evidence Landscape

The analysis revealed that Economic and Socioeconomic Status is the most frequently studied outcome in widowhood research, representing 57.14% (n=16) of the reviewed sample. This indicates a strong scholarly recognition of the economic dimension of widowhood but also exposes thematic imbalance most studies focus narrowly on income poverty and employment loss, with less attention to structural or policy-level determinants.

Geographically, Nigeria and India lead the research landscape, followed by Bangladesh, Kenya, and Ghana. Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia collectively account for over 80% of all studies, underscoring regional concentration but also highlighting the paucity of evidence from Latin America, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia.

Economic Deprivation and Income Loss

Across nearly all reviewed studies, widowhood was found to trigger immediate and sustained income decline. This pattern is attributed to both direct and indirect mechanisms:

- The sudden loss of a primary income earner;
- Exclusion from formal labor markets;
- Lack of inheritance or access to productive resources.

For instance, Eboiyehi (2013) observed that widows in rural Nigeria experience sharp declines in household income within the first year of widowhood, with many falling into chronic poverty. Similar patterns were documented in India (Tripathi & Singh, 2023), where widows often depend on menial jobs or subsistence activities, perpetuating a cycle of low productivity and vulnerability.

Studies across Kenya (Njue & Odek, 2025; Makutsa, 2022) further reveal that widowhood often precipitates *gendered economic displacement*, where women lose access to family land and assets, forcing them into informal vending, domestic work, or casual agricultural labor. These coping mechanisms generate minimal and unstable income streams.

Asset Dispossession and Property Insecurity

Asset loss emerged as one of the most persistent features of economic marginalization. Cultural inheritance systems in many LMICs prioritize male heirs, effectively dispossessing widows. In Ghana, Oduro (2016) found that under customary tenure, widows rarely retain control over marital property unless they consent to levirate marriage. In Kenya, constitutional reforms promising equal inheritance rights have not translated into practice bureaucratic resistance and cultural bias continue to deny women legal ownership of land (Otieno & Muga, 2024).

In Nigeria, studies by Ugwu and Okoro (2022) show that family socioeconomic status and education level significantly influence widows' ability to retain property, suggesting that empowerment is mediated by both legal literacy and class. Asset dispossession not only undermines short-term survival but also removes widows from long-term wealth accumulation processes, exacerbating intergenerational poverty.

Livelihood Strategies and Economic Adaptation

In the face of resource loss, widows engage in various livelihood strategies. Evidence across contexts reveals a dominance of informal sector participation, including street vending, subsistence farming, and home-based enterprises. In Indonesia, Jamiludin (2023) documented widows' reliance on small-scale trade as a primary survival mechanism, though limited access to capital often constrains profitability.

Kenyan studies (Njue & Odek, 2025; Kathenya, 2022) describe widows' participation in collective savings and credit associations locally known as *chamas* which provide small loans and social solidarity. While these networks enhance resilience, they rarely yield upward economic mobility due to the absence of formal market linkages and technical training.

In South Asia, microfinance and self-help groups (SHGs) have shown mixed outcomes. Lombe et al. (2012) report that participation in microcredit programs can improve income stability and self-efficacy, but such programs often fail to address structural gender constraints or reach the most marginalized widows. Furthermore, the risk of debt dependency remains high when repayment pressures exceed earnings capacity.

Determinants of Economic Resilience

Several factors influence widows' ability to recover economically.

1. **Education and Human Capital:** Studies consistently show that literacy and vocational skills correlate with improved income outcomes (Arulmozhi & Kavitha, 2020).
2. **Access to Credit:** The presence of inclusive financial services significantly enhances widows' economic autonomy, though credit discrimination persists (Vo et al., 2023).
3. **Social Support and Networks:** Informal networks offer immediate but limited security, often reinforcing dependency rather than independence (Kutna & Barasa, 2025).
4. **Legal and Policy Environment:** The effectiveness of land and inheritance reforms depends heavily on enforcement capacity and community-level awareness (Otieno & Muga, 2024).

Together, these determinants highlight that economic resilience is not solely a function of individual agency but is embedded in broader structural and institutional systems.

Methodological and Theoretical Trends

A striking pattern across the reviewed literature is the **methodological bias toward cross-sectional quantitative surveys** (52% of studies). These designs capture static economic conditions but fail to account for the evolving trajectories of widowhood. Only 12% of studies adopted longitudinal approaches capable of tracing long-term adaptation or policy effects.

Theoretical engagement also remains limited: 25.8% of studies used no explicit theory, while another 38% relied solely on economic empowerment or human capital models. Feminist and intersectional analyses were rare, even though widowhood is inherently shaped by gender and culture. This theoretical narrowness reduces explanatory depth and policy relevance, emphasizing the need for more integrated frameworks that combine economic and sociocultural variables.

Summary of Key Findings

1. **Income and Asset Loss:** Widowhood precipitates a severe drop in income and access to productive assets.
2. **Informal Livelihoods Dominate:** Most widows rely on precarious informal economic activities with low returns.
3. **Limited Institutional Support:** Social protection and inheritance policies are poorly implemented or absent.
4. **Regional Bias in Research:** Evidence is concentrated in Africa and South Asia, with limited global comparability.

5. Weak Theoretical Foundations: A large portion of studies lack theoretical anchoring, reducing cumulative knowledge development.

These findings form the foundation for the ensuing discussion, which situates widows' economic experiences within broader structural inequalities and development policy frameworks.

Discussion

Structural and Institutional Determinants of Economic Marginalization

The findings from this review reveal that widowhood in LMICs represents more than a personal tragedy it is a *structurally reproduced condition of economic vulnerability*. Across Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, widows are systematically excluded from property, labor, and financial markets. This exclusion operates through a combination of patriarchal inheritance norms, weak legal enforcement, and gendered labor market segmentation.

From a structural inequality perspective, widowhood becomes a mechanism that reproduces women's economic dependency. Even where formal legislation exists such as Kenya's constitutional land rights or India's Hindu Succession Act cultural practices and bureaucratic inertia often undermine enforcement (Makutsa, 2022; Otieno & Muga, 2024). This "implementation gap" exposes the limits of legal reform without corresponding shifts in community-level attitudes and administrative accountability.

Institutionally, widows face barriers to credit, employment, and education. Many microfinance programs remain inaccessible due to lack of collateral or legal identification, while public social protection schemes frequently exclude informal workers (ILO, 2022). The absence of gender-responsive safety nets deepens economic precarity. In this sense, widowhood highlights a broader systemic failure of LMICs to integrate gender-sensitive policies into economic governance frameworks.

Widowhood, Gender, and the Political Economy of Poverty

Within the political economy of gender, widowhood functions as a case study of how economic inequality is reproduced through social relations of power. Widows' exclusion from productive assets mirrors wider patriarchal patterns where economic control is concentrated among men. These patterns are perpetuated by both customary norms and state institutions that privilege male headship.

Feminist economic theory posits that poverty among widows cannot be reduced to income measures alone it must be understood as a form of *economic disempowerment*. The inability to own property, secure credit, or participate in decision-making reflects the systematic denial of economic agency. Furthermore, unpaid care burdens often increase following a husband's death, restricting widows' time for income-generating activities (UN Women, 2022).

This intersection of gender, labor, and social reproduction underscores the inadequacy of purely market-based interventions. Microcredit or skills training programs that ignore structural

constraints risk reinforcing dependency rather than fostering transformation. As DiGiacomo et al. (2013) argue, sustainable empowerment requires not just income but control over the conditions of production land, capital, and labor rights.

Regional Contrasts and Emerging Trends

While economic deprivation is a universal feature of widowhood in LMICs, regional variations reflect distinct cultural and institutional contexts.

- In Sub-Saharan Africa, widowhood is strongly tied to land-based economies, where property dispossession and agricultural exclusion dominate (Eboiyehi, 2013; Oduro, 2016).
- In South Asia, social stigma, caste, and dowry systems further marginalize widows, restricting access to public work programs and credit (Tripathi & Singh, 2023).
- In Southeast Asia, economic transitions and urbanization create both new opportunities and vulnerabilities: microenterprise initiatives may empower some widows but expose others to market risks (Jamiludin, 2023).

A positive development emerging across multiple contexts is the rise of community-based financial cooperatives and self-help groups (SHGs). These grassroots mechanisms, particularly in Kenya, India, and Bangladesh, provide microloans, savings opportunities, and social solidarity. However, without institutional linkage to formal financial systems, their impact remains limited. Strengthening these local innovations through inclusive financial policy could bridge the gap between informal resilience and formal economic empowerment.

Theoretical Implications

The review highlights a theoretical imbalance in widowhood research: economic determinism dominates at the expense of intersectional and feminist analyses. Over 25% of studies employ no theoretical framework, and those that do often rely on the Human Capital or Capability approaches without integrating social power structures. While these frameworks illuminate individual empowerment pathways, they inadequately capture the gendered and institutional dimensions of widowhood.

An integrated theoretical model should therefore combine Human Capital Theory, Capability Approach, and Feminist Political Economy to link micro-level agency with macro-level structures. Human Capital Theory explains why education and training enhance widows' income potential; the Capability Approach expands this by emphasizing agency and dignity; and Feminist Political Economy situates both within systemic patriarchy and policy design. Such integration would produce richer explanations for why empowerment interventions succeed or fail across contexts.

Policy and Development Implications

The evidence suggests that widowhood should be repositioned within national and global development agendas as an explicit gendered poverty issue. To address economic marginalization effectively, governments and development partners must shift from welfare-oriented to rights-based approaches. This includes:

1. Legal Enforcement and Awareness: Strengthening the implementation of inheritance and property laws through gender-sensitive legal aid, community paralegals, and awareness campaigns.
2. Financial Inclusion: Expanding access to credit through collateral-free loans, mobile banking, and women-targeted cooperatives that include widows as beneficiaries.
3. Social Protection: Designing widow-specific safety nets such as pension schemes, cash transfers, and public works that account for both urban and rural contexts.
4. Skills and Enterprise Development: Integrating widows into vocational training, entrepreneurship programs, and digital literacy initiatives under national employment strategies.
5. Cultural Transformation: Supporting community dialogues and advocacy to challenge discriminatory practices such as widow inheritance and cleansing rituals.

Such interventions align with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). They also advance the African Union's Agenda 2063 and similar regional frameworks emphasizing inclusive growth and gender-responsive governance.

Research Implications

This review exposes substantial empirical and methodological gaps that future research must address:

- Longitudinal Analysis: Most studies remain cross-sectional; future work should trace how widows' economic conditions evolve over time.
- Intersectional Focus: There is limited understanding of how age, disability, ethnicity, and conflict contexts shape widowhood outcomes.
- Comparative Frameworks: Cross-national studies could reveal how policy differences influence economic recovery trajectories.
- Participatory Research: Widows themselves should be integrated as co-researchers in knowledge production to ensure cultural relevance and empowerment.

Such directions would strengthen the evidence base for policy and foster a more inclusive and dynamic understanding of widowhood in development research.

Conclusion

The economic and socioeconomic status of widows in low- and middle-income countries constitutes one of the most persistent yet under-addressed forms of gendered poverty. Evidence from this scoping review demonstrates that widowhood precipitates an immediate loss of income, property, and social capital, thrusting women into cycles of economic deprivation and exclusion. The reviewed literature reveals that widows' livelihoods are primarily sustained through informal economic activities with minimal institutional support, and that legal and policy reforms often fail to penetrate entrenched patriarchal systems.

At the theoretical level, the field remains fragmented, with inadequate integration of feminist and intersectional perspectives. Empirically, overreliance on cross-sectional studies and limited geographical coverage hinders a comprehensive understanding. Methodologically, the absence of mediating and moderating analyses reduces explanatory depth. These weaknesses underscore the urgent need for more sophisticated, theory-driven, and contextually grounded research.

Policy responses must therefore transcend welfare paradigms. Sustainable empowerment of widows demands structural interventions securing land rights, ensuring financial inclusion, and integrating widows into formal development frameworks. Governments, international organizations, and civil society actors must recognize widowhood as a critical social justice issue embedded within economic inequality.

Ultimately, addressing widows' socioeconomic exclusion contributes not only to gender equality but also to national development. By ensuring that widows access property, credit, education, and dignified livelihoods, LMICs can advance the broader global vision of inclusive growth articulated in the Sustainable Development Goals and other human rights instruments.

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