

## Review

# Widows, intersectionality and the parable in Luke 18

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**This article deconstructs a master category ‘widows’ by presenting nuances with regards to the term widow, which the authors consider is of interest in a global society. This article aims at stating the process of deconstructing the presumed fixed category widow within theology, whereas the term widow may similarly be used, and is not identical in meaning and content in the global age. The authors begin by considering the discourse of widows in antiquity. They then proceed to widows in Norway and rural Kenya, and their locally based understanding of the parable of the widow and the judge (Luke 18:1-8). Historically, as well as theologically, this text is a challenge and scholars continue to work hard in order to understand its purpose and message. Further, this article in combining text analyses and empirical data shows how this flexible parable creates meaning in rural Kenya and urban Norway. The point of interest is how the master category widows may be deconstructed by employing insights from feminist interpretations and intersectionality to reveal the complexities and variety of widows.**

**Key words:** Intersectionality, widows, parables, biblical tradition, ethnographic studies, deconstruction.

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to deconstruct the master category ‘widows’ and further look at how the parable of the widow and the judge (Luke 18:1-8) can be drawn upon in a global age. The authors want to focus on widows not as a coherent category historically or globally, but they want to explore their difference, variety and multiple life situations.

### HOW CAN THE CATEGORY ‘WIDOWS’ IN A GLOBAL AGE BE UNDERSTOOD?

The authors did this by looking at who was a widow in antiquity, and who is a widow in Norway today and rural Kenya. By use of contemporary ethnographic material, exegetical insights and recent feminist theories, they aim at starting the process of deconstructing the presumed fixed category widow within theology. In order to answer the question, ‘who are widows in a global age’, the authors employ insights from feminist use of intersectionality.

Intersectionality may be defined as a conceptual tool

that is used to analyse how social and cultural categories intertwine. It was first introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw to denote multiple forms of exclusion. In the original sense, it was used to denote ways in which people of colour faced marginalisation owing to single axis frameworks of anti-discrimination laws and feminist theories in North America (Crenshaw, 1989). The major prominent marginalised positions that have been pointed out by Crenshaw are race and gender. However, other scholars have gone further to highlight other marginalised positions, such as illness and disability, ethnicity, sexuality and class, economic situations, colonial history and nationality (Brah, 1996; McCall, 2005; Burman, 2004; Said, 1978). Intersectionality is fruitful as a perspective in this article since it shows the complexity of widowhood in a socio-cultural setting thereby demarcating how widows vary.

Widows in general could be thought of as ‘standing together’ and affected in varying degrees by a particular discrimination, such as gender inequality. The authors are of the position that often times, the larger master category widows may easily overshadow the varieties of widows and the ways that they experience various axes of discrimination. Therefore, their take on widows in a global age is to pay attention to marginalising positions such as illness and economic depravity, ethnicity, sexuality, age etc. which are significant, thereby making it

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possible in this article to focus on diverse positions within the group widows.

Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. He said: "In a certain town, there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men, and there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'grant me justice against my adversary'."

"For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'even though I don't fear God or care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she would not eventually wear me out with her coming!'" And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will He keep putting them off? I tell you, He will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth? Luke 18:1-8 NIV.

The parable of the widow and the judge leaves readers with more questions than answers. Jesus is said to be telling the disciples a parable about their need to pray always and not lose heart: a certain judge who did not fear God nor respect people is repeatedly confronted by a widow who requires justice against her opponent. He hesitates for a long time, but then he gives in since she is troubling him. Jesus uses this parable to claim that God even more than the unjust judge will give justice to those who cry night and day. Jesus ends the parable by asking them whether the Son of Man will find faith on earth when he comes.

## WIDOWS IN BIBLICAL TRADITION

In order to interpret the cause of the confrontation between the judge and the widow, it is of great importance to scrutinize what it meant to be a widow in late antiquity. In the New Testament, in addition to 1 Tim 5:3-16, most attention is given to the widows in Luke-Acts. The etymological roots of the Greek term points to someone who is "forsaken" or "left empty" (Stählin, 1985:440). Some scholars believe that the New Testament gives early glimpses into what later became "the widow's order and a church order for women with important roles in liturgy and service before Christianity became the public religion of the Roman empire (Thurston, 1989). Thus, to draw a picture of who widows in the early Church were is a complicated process.

The responsibility for helping widows and orphans are known from a variety of ancient sources. Certain gods were thought to be concerned especially about the plight of widows and were their helpers, for example the Hebrew tradition's portrait of Yahweh. In the Hebrew Bible, not every woman that had lost her husband is entitled *'almanah* (Hebrew word for widow). An example of this is Ruth. She is called "the woman/wife of Mahlon"

both before and after her marriage with her second husband, Boaz. The widows are often described in almost stereotypical fashion with a similar disadvantaged group, the orphans. The tradition, however, also knew about wealthy widows who inherited their husbands' fortune, like Abigail or Judith. Levirate marriage was practiced when the dead husband did not have any male offspring.

Widows functioned as models of piety in the Jewish tradition. Judith was a female ideal figure who after the death of her husband mourned for three and a half years. She did not marry again and she stood against all temptations and offers. Her life as a widow was marked by chastity and fasting, and ideal widows mentioned in early Christian texts may be modeled after her (Seim, 1994:192). Van der Toorn has pointed out that a widow in the ancient near East represented a potential threat to the established order of the patriarchal society. A widow could be too independent, a potential seductress and witch, and in short, a danger to the public order. As an independent woman, her role was ambiguous: "[I]n the public's perceptions, she is a monument of devotion, wisdom and chastity; on the other hand, she is known as an easy prey for religious fanatics, a prattler, and a woman of loose sexual habits" (Van der Toorn, 1995).

At the same time, her role as a woman without a man made her the prototype of the unprotected and unprivileged in Israel, which is a symbol that made her dependent on God. The reason for the special care and protection given to a widow was theological: God is a refuge and helper of widows, and defends their rights; therefore, obedience to God's will becomes manifested in a special care for widows. At the time of Jesus, there existed a system of organized care for the poor, especially including widows, based on Deuteronomic legislation (Seim, 1994:233-243). The contribution took two forms, one on a daily basis and the other weekly. This description is based on rabbinic sources and it is not sure how this was developed in early Christian communities.

In LXX, the Septuagint *chvra* is almost always used as translation of *'almanah*. In antiquity, also in other Christian texts, *chvra* covers a wide spectrum of women. Virgins and women living apart from their husbands, divorced women and women whose husbands were dead are called widows. This complexity in use of the term is very interesting in order to understand the parable in Luke 18.

When a widow is said to approach a judge, it comes to mind that she has some unsolved matters related to the death of her husband. Perhaps his death faced her with injustice. A Jewish marriage contract (*ketubah*) did not give her the right to inherit, but gave her the right to support out of her husband's estate as specified in the contract (Scott, 1989:180). But if the wide use of the term for widow in antiquity is considered, there might have been other reason for her standing alone. She was

not necessarily weak and in need of protection, grieving over her dead husband. She could be part of a community of widows, like that of Tabitha in Acts 9:36-42, or it might be that she was wealthy with means and capital of her own. That she approached the judge to help her in relation to her opponent, thereby witnesses to her strengths and power.

There are many possible interpretations regarding who the widow and the judge are intended to represent. Obviously, this influences how the parable is interpreted. In the following, the authors will present material on widows today and use the variety and openness offered by this parable in the process of highlighting situated experience as a key to interpreting biblical texts.

### THE CONFRONTATION BETWEEN A JUDGE AND A WIDOW

Both a widow and a judge are characters with special associations and roles in the religious landscape of first and second century Palestine. Judges are carriers of God's justice and law. In this parable, however, the judge can hardly be a metaphor of God, but rather an anti-metaphor as Scott argues (Scott, 1989:175). In a context of eschatological discourse where the hope of the coming kingdom is vibrant, the recommendation of continuing in prayer is central to Luke.

The judge is among the male urban elite, but still he is acting outside the bounds of society since he neither fears God nor has respect for women or men (Scott, 1989:178-180). The need of this widow [chvra], whatever caused it, at first seems to be none of his business. The widow relates to him with no introductory words of honor, but in the imperative mood, as Luke reports it. That a widow approached the judge on her own, going directly to him without company, is puzzling to scholars. What kind of judge is he supposed to be (Roman, Jewish or Christian?) is also an open question (Price, 1997:197-198). The legal situation in Palestine at the time of Jesus was vague and complex. This text, however, focuses not so much on the juridical matters as the confrontation between the widow and the judge (Scott, 1989:184).

What kind of trouble is the widow causing for the judge? Why is he giving in to her wishes if he, as he also admits himself, has no respect for God or man? What kind of power did this widow have? The widow caused him trouble, but the Greek terminology used opens up for several interpretations. The Greek, *hypopiazō* means, literally, to hit under the eye. It might be that he is afraid that she shall attack him physically by running into his eyes or face, and give him a "black eye." But, to say that she had physical power or any means to treat him badly seems unlikely, since a chief characteristic of a widow was her defenselessness and since he himself had a high social rank. He might be sick and tired of her since she repeatedly approaches him, but then he could have

rejected her by other means and did not have to give in for her wishes. More likely, he fears that she will be able to influence his life in one way or the other. Perhaps, he is afraid that she will spread slander about him, which is one of the possible meanings of this term. Although he feared no man or God, he might have feared for his own reputation and how this widow's slander might ruin it. After all, his position as a judge relied on respect in the broader society.

### WIDOWS IN NORWAY

What do we know about widows in the Norwegian society today? Changing family patterns and a high degree of gender equality makes the category "widow" ("enke") a blurred one.<sup>1</sup> Widows face very different challenges due to factors like age, social class, work, urban/rural settings, social network, religious background and ethnicity and categories highlighted in studies using intersectionality. Economically and juridically, women and men are given equal rights, and widows inherit their husbands according to the same rules as widowers inherit their wives. Some women live without men, due to the fact that more than half of the marriages end with divorce, or because women choose to live alone or are involved in other family-variations.<sup>2</sup>

It is not an easy task to present characteristics of Norwegian widows and their life-situation. A few sources from the public discourse have been used in order to present the complexity of how the term is used and what challenges, life as a widow may indicate. In order to analyze what needs widows might have, an interesting illustration on an internet discussion-forum where women reflect upon juridical matters regarding social relations and family life was found. One woman, apparently recently widowed, asks for how long she must keep on filling in "widow" on registration forms for governmental use. She wonders whether she can instead choose the category "unmarried," and whether she will change title if she moves in with another man without marrying him.<sup>3</sup> She is given answers from various other participants in the discussion forum: One reflects on how it seems "unnatural" to move from "widow" to "unmarried," and others remind her that the formal definition of a widow is "a person who has lost her husband." A (younger) girl then objects, arguing that if a sixteen years old girl loses her boyfriend she also becomes a widow, as she herself was told when she participated in a group for persons in sorrow. For this reflection, she is given the following comments: "Mentally and obviously, you are in the same situation as a widow due to sorrow, but not in a juridical sense..."

This discussion suggests that characteristics of a widow can be "borrowed" by others. Although the juridical definition is clear, other categories of women can experience to be widows too. The characteristic of a widow is

shared with other groups of women who have experienced the loss of their beloved ones, regardless of how their relation was defined juridical. Her individual experience of sorrow may qualify her to be considered a widow, at least in some social situations.<sup>4</sup>

The participants in this discussion forum also question the relevance of remaining a widow if a woman gets involved in a new relationship.<sup>5</sup> Lifelong widowhood seems odd in a culture where very few are involved in only one relationship throughout their whole life. They also reflect upon the fact that a woman who has lost a husband may after a while feel she is more “un-married” than “widow.” To remain a widow seems meaningless since the loss of the husband no longer is a central element in her life or her character. The only way out of widowhood in Norway if we judge according to public definitions, is to marry again (or die).

In the urban middle-class Norwegian culture, organized individualistic and focused on personal success and well-being, to form a heterosexual couple is part of the self-realization-project.<sup>6</sup> When a woman loses her husband, she might face unexpected challenges. If we judge according to how much mass media and popular culture focuses on the successful heterosexual couple, it might involve a fall in status and prestige to become a widow. Like a woman who experiences divorce or who never finds a partner, the widow is left out of social situations where everyone else comes as couples. Perhaps, her former friends stop inviting her since she represents a social outcast or they are afraid she will flirt with their husbands, echoing some elements from widows in antiquity. Older widows might experience some of the same social mechanisms, also due to the fact that widowers seem to re-marry much faster and often with younger women (Chambers, 2005)).

When it comes to churches, old women and widows are overrepresented in many congregations. Some churches have groups for widows, to heal their sorrow or of a more social character. In the fall of 2005, the text about the widow and the judge was suggested as an alternative text for sermons in the church of Norway, but the two most important journals for homiletical preparations show that the category “widow” is given very little weight. One commentator even fails to mention that the judge is confronted by a *widow*: the judge is simply said to be helping another person to get security and peace.<sup>7</sup> The other journal identifies the widow with all those who are worried, or who are praying to God when facing persecution. The reader is recommended to go to the homepage of a missionary organization in order to find material from suffering people around the world. In addition, pastors are also advised to look around in their own congregations, but not specifically to look for widows. We are not given any help in these two journals in order to find any good news for widows, or to grasp what kind of injustice widows in present-day Norway may suffer.

The fact that it is possible to overlook completely that the person in need is a widow and not any kind of human being in a difficult situation is rather striking. As a prime example on a suffering person, “widow” seems to be an outdated and even irrelevant category in the social environment of the church. Widows do not represent a homogenous group and they are no longer considered symbols of persons in need.

The special characteristic attributed to a widow in antiquity, to be marginalised by justice on two accounts, both gender and social position are not part of this present day application of the parable. Nevertheless, gender and social position, and especially the combination of these two categories, still produce vulnerable positions. It could be possible to find persons who are specifically vulnerable today due to exactly these two accounts. Domestic violence as well as sex trade witness to the fact that women are considered less valuable and suffer injustice.<sup>8</sup> The fear of losing one’s social position by being divorced or left behind in one way or the other is real to women who statistically earn less than men or who have their social role as mother and wife.

In summary, “widow” in Norway today is a term for a woman who has lost her husband, but a woman who has experienced loss of her beloved one regardless of juridical relation can be considered to be in a common situation when it comes to sorrow. The concept of “mentally” being like a widow represents a creative adjustment to the changing social climate. This more opens the use of the term echoes on how *chvra* is used in antiquity, and in Norway today it is not the single-ness or un-protectedness that legitimates the inclusive use, but the individual experience of grief. Widows in Norway share the experience of being left out of the heteronormative couple based culture with divorced, single or lesbian women. They may experience social isolation and loneliness, regardless of age and background. They share with widows in late antiquity the unarticulated fear that their “awakened sexuality” makes them potential seducers of other wives’ husbands.

## WIDOWS IN KENYA

Fieldwork for this article was conducted in rural Vihiga district, Western Kenya in 2006. The authors undertook extended involvement in the social life of practicing Christian widows in rural Vihiga for three months where they adopted ethnography as a method of empirical research. This entailed living in the community for an extended period, observing behaviour, listening to, engaging in what was said in conversations and asking questions (Agar (1980:1-77)). In the end, they had indepth material from a total of 16 practicing Christian widows gathered both individually and from group sessions.

Widows in Kenya are not homogenous, but vary.

Simplistically stated here, there are widows who reside in the urban cities and rural areas. As such, there are different ways in which the widows in either places negotiate within their situation for survival. At the same time, their preoccupations, concerns, anxieties and questions would necessarily vary owing to their immediate social context.

The term widow among the Abanyole, a subgroup of the Luhya people of Western Kenya is '*mulekhwa*'. When the main verb '*lekhwa*' is directly translated in a literal sense, it denotes 'left', 'left alone', 'left behind' and 'left without'. A widow from the Abanyole peoples among whom this study was conducted is a woman whose marriage bond was exogamous, meaning a marriage outside of her clan. As such, widowhood as depicted in this article is distinguished in its characteristic as following the principle of lineage marriage, where the woman involved was married within an alliance involving both partners and their extended families. The study shall proceed by presenting two widows indicating structural patterns that influence their lives and who share in common injustice.

### **CASE ONE: LILIAN<sup>9</sup>**

Lilian was born in 1945 and lives in a brick house, two kilometres from the nearest main road in a village in Western Kenya Vihiga district. Her house is roofed with iron sheets and has two bedrooms besides the living room area. Her bathroom and toilet are constructed behind her house. Upon entering Lilian's compound, about five metres from the gate on the right hand side is a grave. This is the only grave in her compound.

Further ahead, another 15 m from the grave is Lilian's house, centrally placed within this compound, and directly faces her compound's entrance. To the left hand side of her house is a one roomed clay house and to the right are three two-roomed mud houses. These houses belong to her sons and their wives. Lilian has ten children, six of whom are sons and four are daughters. Her eldest son was born in 1963 and her last child, a son was born in 1981.

Behind her house is a farm land which measures two acres. This farm extends to a stream at the very end of her land. She has planted maize, napier grass, vegetables and beans. She has fruit trees such as avocado trees, pawpaws and guavas. She also keeps two heifers for milk purposes and feeds them with the grass from her compound.

The grave in her compound belongs to her late husband Alex who died in 1992. It is not cemented but the top cover is raised and around it are big brown stones neatly placed. A tree is planted very close by the grave. Lilian and Alex married in a typical traditional manner, and this involved Alex's family and male clan leaders taking to Lilian's parents, bride wealth. The phenomenon

of paying bride wealth among the Abanyole is intertwined in a complicated social structure, so that it is not purely an economic transaction, rather, as an exchange of gifts between two parties, which creates alliances between lineages. It is described as the sign of a "real marriage" or security and identity of children. Bride wealth assured the paternal inheritance and identity of the children and as such children from the marriages belong to the lineage of their fathers. Lilian's marriage thus followed the principle of lineage marriage where a marriage alliance is forged between both partners and their families. She consequently left her own family and made her abode within a patrilocal setting with the family of Alex.

However, Alex's father was hostile to Alex since he used to defend his mother and come to her rescue each time his father turned violent. Thus, Alex's father deliberately delayed to give Alex his inheritance which was to be a portion of ancestral land.

Lilian and Alex were married for 30 years by the time of his death and for several years they worked as casual workers at a nearby regional hospital. Owing to Alex's father's hostility, Lilian and Alex saved up some money and purposed to purchase their own parcel of land within the same locality. They were fortunate to get a person who wanted to sell land close by, so they paid up the initial deposit and moved into this new parcel of land. Over time, they managed to pay the outstanding balance. However, the final transfer of the title deed was still pending. The seller was delaying to transfer the title for several years and Alex died while the process was still incomplete.

Alex passed away following a sudden illness. According to Lilian, when she reached the hospital bed in which he lay, he had already passed away and her first thoughts were "what shall I do with all these children that he has left me with?" "What about the piece of land which we were still in the process of acquiring?" "How shall I be able to pay the fees of all these children?" During Alex's funeral, she pleaded in public for cooperation from the seller of the land regarding the title since she had six sons who would soon need to be settled.

### **CASE TWO: AGNES**

Agnes was born in 1948. She lives in a mud-built house which is roofed with iron sheets. Such houses are common in this area and they are often smeared with cow dropping in order to keep the dust down and to maintain them. Her house is two-roomed and 1.5 km from the main road. Agnes does not have a structured gate to her house. Her bathroom and toilet are on one extreme of the compound towards the very front.

On the both sides of her house are two mud houses that are two-roomed each. These houses belong to her sons who reside with their wives. Her sons have children who like to stay with her and often times spend the nights

in her house. Agnes keeps one dairy animal which is tethered in her compound.

She married John in 1964. Her parents received animals from John's family and she left her father's clan to join a new clan, John's clan. The same applies as in Lillian's case with regards to bride wealth which as an exchange of gifts between two parties, created alliances between lineages. It was the sign of the identity of children.

In Agnes' compound is her husband's grave and the grave of one grandchild. Agnes' husband died in 2002 and they had been married for 38 years. In her case, her husband John was given his portion of land which was another piece of land belonging to John's father. There, Agnes and John built a house and lived in it. Both of them were casual labourers in people's farms. They never had formal employment away from this area. By farming for people and farming their piece of land, they met their daily subsistence and together they had 10 children.

John was taking medicine at home over a period of time, and then he later became feverish and could not talk. He was rushed to the hospital and soon after, he was pronounced dead. It turned out that John had been taking a wrong prescription that was offered to him by a friend. John's death was very difficult for Agnes, since she was accused of killing her husband and of planning evil.

But soon after the burial, her neighbours who border her piece of land both conspired and moved land boundaries, thus reducing her piece of land. Agnes lamented, "when John was alive you did not do this, you have just waited for him to be buried and not even for long, you start moving land marks?" Agnes was very distressed since she had eight sons and two daughters.

## **GENDER SYSTEM IN RURAL VIHIGA DISTRICT**

Having considered Lillian's and Agnes' family situations, clearly, their kinship associations through alliance are significant. This was also the case with the other 14 widows in rural Vihiga. The focus of established anthropology regarding kinship has been that gender is constructed in specific social systems. Accordingly, the interrelationship between gender and kinship can only be understood as embedded in particular cultural and political systems.

In order to rethink gender and kinship, scholars have argued for attention to the symbolic organisation of gender by investigating what constitutes "power" before arriving at an analysis of gender asymmetry. This has taken the stance of positing critique of essentialist tendencies in feminism. They have also argued that gender needs to be examined in the context of power and inequality. At the same time they argue for an investigation of historical transformations in gender systems (Whitehead and Ortner, 1981). One way of

examining gender among the Abanyole is through the lens of a gender system approach.<sup>10</sup>

The gender system approach was conceptualised by Yvonne Hirdmann who argued that there are variations of women's positions in every national, regional and local sphere as well as the potential for transformation. To her, "gender system is a dynamic structure, a conceptualisation of networks of processes, phenomenon, perceptions and expectations which through their interrelations creates patterns and regularities." (Nyberg, 2004).

To Hirdman, gender system is a base for social, economic and political ordering. Primarily, the gender system has two logics, the first is the practise of separation of genders done by emphasising the biological differences between the sexes and the implications that they have on the potentials of each sex, and also by keeping the genders apart, doing different tasks, having different responsibilities and networks in different places. The important thing is not how the genders are separated, but how they are. The second logic is that of the primacy of the male norm, in that man is seen as the norm for what a human is, thinks, behaves etc. This creates a hierarchical ordering and has implications on societal norms and regulations (Nyberg, 2004: 103-106).

Using the gender system approach, the logic of separation of genders can be noticed among the Abanyole due to clear separation of tasks as performed by the respective genders. It is only males who can apportion land and place land boundary markers. Women do not participate in this traditional and important rite. It is also only men who can place the first mark and the central pole for a house before and during construction. The Abanyole men are responsible for and control resource allocation within the lineage, particularly land. Only Abanyole men can dig graves and lower the casket into the grave.

Likewise, it is possible to state that the logic of the male norm is evidenced among the Abanyole in several ways. The clan founder was Anyole (a male) and his children who are recognised and remembered are his male children, the founders of each of the clans of the Abanyole people.

Though the Abanyole society is patriarchal, power is dependent on age and gender. It therefore follows that the gender system affects both women and men of various ages and marital status' differently. Within this locally evolved gender system among the Abanyole, there is room for manoeuvre for women and men. For this reason the gender system approach allows us to notice instances where various kinds of women negotiate within power structures according to their ages.

### **Reading the parable and identifying injustice**

During the authors' interaction with Abanyole widows, they gathered with widows on several occasions within

their own self-help group. This self-help group was their own initiative and they had been meeting also before the authors arrived in the area. The purpose of this group was primarily to create an environment where widows would meet, encourage and advice each other in their faith and be there for each other. The authors were introduced to this group by a local Anglican female priest. Together with these widows, they discussed various issues related to their past, present and their vision for tomorrow, and read the bible together. Both Agnes and Lilian were part of this group.

During one session, the Lukan parable of the widow and the judge was read. In this session, eight widows were present, including Agnes and Lilian.

But as they read the parable, it was realized that the widows had "owned" the text, in that they took it upon themselves to suggest various injustices that the widow in the passage may have been facing. Their starting point was with themselves and their own present lives. In this way, they sought to fill what they saw as the missing content of the parable. The authors encouraged these widows to do this, since it has been well expressed by liberation theologians that the third world does to a large extent, present us with a historical reality somewhat analogous to the theological setting in which the gospel accounts are said to have been generated (Sobrinho, 1993: 122). It is from this that we took a cue.

This is how they proceeded and they named the injustices that they faced as including defamation, slander and isolation, economic depravity, land injustice and the challenge of hostile in-laws. According to these widows as unattached women within a small rural community, they were exposed to slander and defamation. They were thought as being capable of stealing people's husbands. The younger widows said that before the church would administer Holy Communion to them, they would have a period within which the church leadership observed them and became convinced that they were not known to be "sleeping around." Having shown that they were able to quench their sexual desires, they would then formally partake in the Holy Communion. As we have already mentioned, unattached women, as in antiquity are prone to labelling that surround their sexuality. This makes them a potential threat to the order in a patriarchal society.

The widows in this session explained that economic depravity set in especially when inheritance and major resources were controlled by their husbands. Hostile in-laws also featured as sources of injustice. Further, these widows pointed to land related injustices.

Both Lilian and Agnes had been married for more than 25 years, and they each had more than five sons. At the same time, they both were confronted with problems regarding land issues right after the death of their husbands. It is this injustice that the authors shall pursue for the moment.

Both Lilian and Agnes agreed that they had adversaries

whom they had to contend with.

Lilian had to engage lawyers and went through a court case that lasted 3 years. The court cases were time consuming and also very expensive. But this was the only way she would get the title registered to her family. Lilian's adversaries were the seller of the land and his relatives who were asking him to use this opportunity given by a helpless widow to defraud her.

On the other hand, Agnes' adversaries were her two neighbours who had simultaneously encroached onto her land. She went to the area chief who called a meeting with the neighbours and clan elders. The elders came and did a survey of the land and agreed that the neighbours were at fault. Agnes had to pay for the services of the elders and for the case to be resolved. Her payment was less compared to payments that would have to be made in a court of law.

### Significance of land

The way that both Lilian and Agnes dealt with land issues and disputes that befell them have been shown. But why is land in rural western Kenya so important? For both Agnes and Lilian, land gives a sense of belonging and identity to their sons. It is in sons inheriting their father's land that their identity within the clan is reinforced.

Ancestral land has both religious and spiritual significance, because in it is the ancestors of the peoples. It is in this land or in land nearby home and not the cemeteries that Lillian's and Agnes' husbands were buried. In burying them there, they were then connected to the ancestors. On the other hand, land is the property that these widows remained with. Through farming this land, the widows and their children get daily food. It is their source of livelihood and as such it is very important.

The land in which widows lived denoted settling. By having a place that they were sure belonged to them and their grandchildren, both Agnes and Lilian would rest in peace in the event of their demise. They already would know where they would be buried and in many years to come their children etc. At the same time, due to the marriage alliance, Lilian and Agnes are both wives of an individual and of the lineage. Consequently, they belonged to a new lineage under the custody of their husbands, and as such left their own family and made their abode in a patrilocal setting with the family of the husband.<sup>11</sup> This complicates the situation with regards to remarriage. Both Agnes and Lilian did not consider remarriage.

They have sons who were already married and living with their daughters-in-laws. Their daughters' in-laws had moved into this patrilocal setting to be joined with their husbands. As such, it was important that the women married into this home, find a place they can have their houses set.

But on the other hand, was it very important for Agnes

and Lilian to have this land? It may be argued that it was not as important to them as individuals but for their sons. This may be closely linked with a patriarchal culture in which males are preferred and sacrifices are made for the male children, sometimes at the expenses of their mothers and other females. In part, this is in line with the logic of the male norm as already indicated.

## CONCLUSION

This article has endeavored to deconstruct the presumed fixed category widow within theology by drawing from the Norwegian and the Kenyan contexts. Different widows face different challenges in these contexts due to factors like age, social class, work, urban/rural settings, social networks, religious backgrounds and ethnicity, economic status and categories highlighted in studies by way of intersectionality. Gender and social position, and especially the combination of these two categories do produce vulnerable positions for widows whose earnings are meagre or who have their social role as mother and wife.

The widows highlighted in the Kenyan context are primarily residing in the rural setting, hence their attachment to land. The widows in Norway were situated in the urban setting and land related issues were not central to their livelihood. Clearly, widows in these two contexts will articulate different life experiences besides the loss of their spouses. But, recurrent in all three social contexts, an aspect that is noticeable is the unarticulated fear that their awakened sexuality makes them potential seducers of other wives' husbands. Injustice experienced by women due to social isolation or suspicion to their female sexuality has theological relevance and seems to have wide-ranging influence. This tendency is identified in late antiquity, as well as in today's Kenya and Norway. For some reason, categories of women related to men, such as wives or mothers, seem to be given more attention in the history of the church than widows who are defined by their lack of a specific male relation.

Often, traditional responses to widowhood are intended to draw a curtain over her sexuality and make her into a non-sexual being. Cultural inhibitions hold that either widows should not have sexual desires or needs whatsoever, or that their sexuality must be stringently controlled. Yet the denial of widows' sexuality can have appalling consequences such as unwanted pregnancies, child bearing and even abortions.<sup>12</sup> An intersectional view of this shows that widows are also marginalized based on their sexuality. In general, attitudes to the sexuality of widows are at the very heart of their low status and marginalization in many contexts.

Widows in Kenya do perhaps represent a culture closer to the ancient Mediterranean context than the Norwegian widows, but if they are used as models that are "useful to think with", the study runs the risk of constructing them as others.<sup>13</sup> The authors will argue that they are not

interesting only because they live in a culture that reminds us of the ancient society at the time of Jesus. Significant differences between today's rural Kenya and ancient Palestine is then overseen and taken to be all the same, since they both differ from the Western context. Then important nuances are simplified in the eagerness to understand the culture Luke was part of. On the contrary, the study's Kenyan fieldwork gives a unique chance to enter into the world of readers that normally are not given the position of speaking in scholarship. They have not only the key to understand the parable, but represent situations that normally have no privileged position in the global community. They do their theological interpretations by using their own lives, not depending on exegetical scholarship.

Perhaps, the gift of the parable of the widow and the judge is its instability and flexibility and thereby also, its openness. As an almost archetypical pattern, it tells about a marginalized person who asks for justice, she is rejected but gets what she wants in the end. As a metaphor for how God gives justice to the people, although they experience suffering and injustice, this story is perhaps one of the most usable parables in the gospels. A widow although not belonging to a coherent category is the protagonist in this parable. This article has therefore paid attention to widows, in view of marginalising positions which they are exposed to.

Theologians should search for interpretations that open up a global perspective with room for both the individual injustice and the injustice of other people. When churches read the parable of the widow and the judge in Norway, the authors think that widows are worth mentioning, although they do not represent a coherent group.

If interpretations of this parable that emphasize its difficult historical interpretation and Luke's strange redaction framework are given an exclusive role, the study misses theological insights from those who experience injustice today. This article has clearly shown how this flexible parable of the widow and the judge can create meaning in rural Kenya and urban Norway. It has also shown what happens to biblical texts when they are given meaning locally in the global age.

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## FOOT NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Randi Epland, "Enker i sorg: ProblemSeesøningsstrategier og helse. En empirisk undersøkelse blant 36 enker ca. 6 uker etter tap av ektefelle" (Hovedoppgave, 1989).

<sup>2</sup>The Norwegian marriage regulations and practices are described in the various articles in *Evig Din? Ekteskaps –og samlivstradisjoner i det flerreligiøse Norge/ Berit Synøve Thorbjørnsrud (red.), Abstract, Oslo 2005*

<sup>3</sup>"Paperless marriage," called *samboerskap*.

<sup>4</sup>In the fall 2007 the Norwegian government finished a broader hearing regarding a common marriage law or a gender neutral marriage law. They suggest that the law for same-sex partnership shall be part of the marriage law, giving homosexual couples all the same rights as heterosexuals. Today, homosexuals who lose their partners are called "gjenlevende partner" ("surviving partner"). Will the suggested law involved also provide for lesbians



who lose their partners to juridically becomes widows?

<sup>5</sup> See Kvinneguiden forum/Diskusjoner/Samliv og relasjoner at [www.kvinneguiden.no](http://www.kvinneguiden.no)

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the basis of a Norwegian marriage, see Kjetil Hafstad, "Livsfullbyrdelse gjennom kjærlighetsvalg: Ekteskapet i luthersk tradisjon," in *Evig din?: Ekteskaps- og samlivstradisjoner i det flerreligiøse Norge*, ed. Berit Thorbjørnsrud (Oslo: Abstrakt, 2005), esp. p 94-95: 100-101.

<sup>7</sup> "I preteksten for bots og bededag fortelles det om en dommer som hjelper en annen for å sikre egen trygghet og fred," in Bjarne Kjeldsen, "Bot og bededag 30. oktober 2005," *Nytt norsk kirkeblad* 7, no. 33 (2005), 44.

<sup>8</sup> Some years ago, Norway's border to Russia was a main zone for female trafficking and prostitution. Also lesbian women have suffered discrimination in the public discourse on the new gender neutral marriage legislation to be ratified in Norway from January 2009. See the daily newspaper *Aftenposten*. [www.aftenposten.no](http://www.aftenposten.no)

<sup>9</sup> All names have been changed for purposes of confidentiality.

<sup>10</sup> Primarily, material related to gender system by Hirdman is obtained in Swedish as follows, Hirdman, Yvonne (1988): 'Genussystemet –reflexioner kring kvinnors sociala undervårdning' *Kvinnovetenskaplig tidskrift* (1988:3:49-63), Sweden. Our choice for this approach is its currency in recent scholarly work within sub-Saharan Africa. Many studies conducted in Sub-Saharan Africa have appropriated this concept. See Lee-Smith Diana, 'My house is my Husband: A Kenyan Study of Women's Access to Land and Housing', Department of Architecture and Development Studies, (Lund University, Sweden, 1997) applies a gender system approach in order to see how gender relations within households, places, spaces and mobility also mediate neighbourhoods and cities in Kenya. Similarly, gender system has been applied in Botswana when looking at self-help housing construction, see Kalabamu Faustin, 'Changing gender contracts in self-help housing construction in Botswana: The case of Lobatse. *Habitat International* (Volume 29. Issue 2. 2005). More so it has been applied within the very district we worked in. Thus, we have primarily, relied on the use of this approach as appropriated within a recent study in Vihiga district by Helen Nyberg. Nyberg's 2004 PhD study, '*At least there is something!*' *Strategic Decision making by female farmers in Western Kenya* submitted at the department of Human geography, Stockholm University was conducted among the Luo and the Luyia in Siaya and Vihiga districts of Kenya.

<sup>11</sup> Alembi, Ezekiel. The Construction of the Abanyole Perceptions on Death through Oral Funeral Poetry. See also Kirwen, Micheal. African Widows.

<sup>12</sup> See Margaret Owen in her work on widows where she handles sex and sexuality of widows.

<sup>13</sup> Many scholars are sensitive to the risk of "othering" when difference between people is needed to construct the self. The difference between "us" and "them" are emphasized in order to re-inscribe hegemonic patterns. See one of the pioneers in this way of analyzing knowledge, Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (N.Y.: Pantheon Books, 1978).

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