

The background of the top half of the slide features a repeating watermark of the St. Catherine University logo, which consists of a stylized sunburst or fan shape with a cross inside a circle at the top of each spoke.

**ST. CATHERINE  
UNIVERSITY**

**SUBMIT TO SURVIVE:  
AN EXPLORATION OF SEXUAL CLEANSING AS AN  
ACT OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WIDOWS IN THE  
LUO COMMUNITY OF KENYA**

**PRESENTER: LESO MUNALA, PHD**

## **SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN KENYA**

- **39 %** of women experience physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence **in their lifetime**
- **26 %** of women have experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence **in the last 12 months**

(Kenya Demographic and Health Survey, 2014)

# FROM WIDOW TO INHERITANCE

**Death of spouse**

**Identify cleanser  
&  
Sexual Cleansing**

**Widow  
reintegrated  
back into the  
community**

## SEXUAL CLEANSING

- According to tradition Luo widows are expected to engage in sexual intercourse with a “cleanser,” without the use of a condom, in order to remove the impurity ascribed to her after her husband's death.
- This cultural practice requires widows to be “cleansed” in order to re-enter society and to protect the family from the bad omen following the death of their spouse.
- After a widow has been “cleansed,” she is expected to be inherited by a man, traditionally an in-law.

## **RISK FACTORS**

- Poverty is a risk factor that increases a woman's vulnerability to sexual violence (Slabbert, 2017; Goodman et al., 2009).
- Cultural practices can serve either as protective or risk factor to sexual violence because it can justify the perpetuation of violence.

## STUDY OBJECTIVE

To explore and understand the lived experiences of widows who have undergone sexual cleansing



## METHODS

### STUDY DESIGN

- Qualitative research
- 27 face-to-face in-depth interviews in Dholuo and Swahili

### SAMPLE

- Widows 18 years and older who have undergone sexual cleansing living in Siaya County
- Widows ranged from 29 to 90 years

### DATA ANALYSIS

- Conventional content analysis

## RESULTS

- A majority of the participants stated the cleansing ritual was forcefully initiated, violently fulfilled, and frequently reported as rape.
- These findings are similar to those of a previous study which show that a significant number of widows who underwent the cleansing ritual declared to have done so by force (Cruz et al., 2018).
- In the community, widows who undergo cleansing are often described as willing participants of this cultural practice, with the autonomy to engage in contractual arrangements with their cleansers

## RESULTS CONT:

- The results of this research study provides new insights of the cultural practice of widow cleansing and inheritance involved physical, verbal, mental, and social abuse.
- Participants frequently used the word “force” to describe the initiation and the carrying out of this cultural practice.

## **AN ACT OF RAPE**

20 participants interviewed defined widow  
cleansing as an act of **rape**

Why...

- Lack of choice and desire
- Presence of physical force
- Absence of consent

## LACK OF CHOICE AND DESIRE

*“It is rape because you have been given someone against your choice. Like the one who was chosen for me he had already been with somebody else”*

*“Yes it is rape because the person comes to you and you are not attracted to them. It is like someone strangling you, if someone grabs you forcefully, there is no pleasure. It is forced. You are not interested in the act. You did not want and yet he insists he must do it.”*

## **PRESENCE OF PHYSICAL FORCE**

*“It was a fight. For us to sleep together, it was a struggle. He was being forceful. Being a man, he overpowered me. He overpowered me and he had sex with me in the house that night... He told me if I refuse he will beat me....”*

*“You would be locked with him in the house so you could not escape. He could even beat you up. You give in to avoid being beaten. Which is better to be beaten or to save your life?”*

## ABSENCE OF CONSENT

*“Cleansing by force is rape, because you have forced this person with what she does not want’*

*“Yes it is like rape because the woman did not consent’*

*“Yes, because it is not consensual. You resist and you are forced. You were not willing. The man can be brutal and leave you with physical injuries. So it is rape’*

## DISCUSSION

- Findings from this study necessitate identification of the cultural practice of widow cleansing as an act of violence against women.
- The identification of this cultural practice as an act of violence has important legal and public health implications.
- Identifying widow cleansing as a violation of human right underlines government's obligation to implement and enforce legislation to eliminate this practice.

- As an act of violence, this cultural practice is a violation of women's fundamental human rights, highlighting the need for the creation of judicial institutions that ensure victim's access to justice and protect against this form of gender-based violence
- While there have been objections to the legislation of cultural practices, anti-FGM legislation has been effective in countries with strict enforcement measures .
- Similar gains can be achieved with the elimination of widow cleansing practices.

## **SEXUAL OFFENSES ACT**

- Section 29 of the act specifically addresses cultural and religious sexual offences through the statement that, “Any person who for cultural or religious reasons forces another person to engage in a sexual act or any act that amounts to an offence under this Act is guilty of an offence and is liable upon conviction to imprisonment for a term of not less than ten years”

- The cultural practice of widow cleansings is one of many oppressive and dehumanizing widowhood practices women are subjected to; these practices tend to be resistant to change as many societies evolve and transition to modernization
- Research shows that widows with low literacy and economic empowerment tend to readily submit to negative widowhood practices than more enlightened and financially independent widows (Gunga, 2009).
- Educating women of their rights, has the potential to enhance the rights of widows as well as empower women groups to collectively fight against harmful cultural practices

## CONCLUSION

- This study uniquely identifies the cultural practice of widow cleansing as an act of sexual violence against women. Widows who have undergone cleansing have done so against their will.
- Study results highlights the precarious nature of widowhood and associated increased risk of negative psychological, social and health consequences of violence.
- Eliminating this harmful practice requires the establishment of supportive legislation and community engagement interventions aim at increasing awareness, addressing societal norms and changing attitudes.

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# QUESTIONS

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