

The Status Paradox and Institutional Invisibility of Ministers' Widows Within the CCAP Synod of Livingstonia

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the lived experiences of ministers' widows in the CCAP Synod of Livingstonia, Malawi, revealing a "status paradox": women who serve as active, unpaid ministry partners become institutionally invisible upon bereavement. Synod policy documents are completely silent on widows' welfare, despite requiring male ministers to be married. Using Osmer's four-task framework and integrating Sustainable Livelihood and Pastoral Care models, the research draws on interviews with ten widows and fifteen church officials. Findings reveal that widows face financial precarity, housing loss, social stigma, and spiritual distress—the collapse of the "Mama Muliska" identity they were formed to inhabit. Policy silence, the "housewife" construct creating dependency, and patriarchal systems produce this vulnerability. The study proposes comprehensive reform: a formal Widowhood Welfare Policy, transformed identity formation for ministers' wives, economic empowerment, structured pastoral care, and cultural transformation. It offers a pathway from institutional invisibility to justice and renewed belonging.

Keyterms: Ministers' Widows, Pastoral Care, Sustainable Livelihoods, Identity Formation, Status Paradox, Institutional Invisibility

INTRODUCTION

"Mama Muliska" the honorific for a minister's wife in the CCAP Synod of Livingstonia carries profound social weight. During her husband's lifetime, she is revered as a mother figure, unpaid ministry partner, and moral exemplar. Yet upon his death, this elevated status evaporates. The woman once addressed with deference becomes, in one participant's words, "invisible like I never existed" (R009). This "status paradox" reveals how women's status is derivatively attached through marriage rather than inherent.

The Synod's governance documents including the Constitution, Standing Orders, and Conditions of Service are completely silent on widows' welfare, despite requiring male ministers to be married. The wife is institutionally necessary for ordination but institutionally invisible once her husband dies. The consequences are severe: housing eviction, social marginalization, and spiritual crisis contradicting both biblical mandates and national gender commitments.

This study investigates the experiences of ministers' widows within the CCAP Synod of Livingstonia as they navigate the transition from honored "Mama Muliska" to institutionally invisible widow and examines the theological and practical responses this situation demands. The study documents the lived realities of financial collapse, social marginalization, and spiritual distress following bereavement. It analyzes the institutional policies, cultural expectations, and structural dynamics that produce the status paradox. Through theological reflection drawing on biblical mandates, Reformed principles, and African feminist theology, it articulates what the church owes its widows. Finally, it proposes concrete strategies for policy reform, economic empowerment, and pastoral care. Based on interviews with ten widows and fifteen church officials, and utilizing Sustainable Livelihood and Pastoral Care frameworks, this study offers recommendations for urgent action.

Background of the Study

The CCAP Synod of Livingstonia was established by Scottish Presbyterian missionaries in 1875, and from its inception, its mission extended beyond evangelism to shape the social fabric of Northern Malawi through schools and hospitals (McCracken, 2008; Munyenyembe, 2019). Over more than a century, the Synod has evolved into a major indigenous church with a structured administrative framework that governs the lives of its ministers and their families. Yet within this framework lies a contradiction that this study seeks to expose: the same church that requires ministers to be married has no provisions for their wives once they are widowed.

Theologically, the CCAP views marriage as a sacred, lifelong covenant, and Christian theology explicitly calls for the church to care for widows and vulnerable members (Kubeka, 2011; Nwankwor & Okolo, 2021). However, a critical examination reveals a significant disconnect between these espoused principles and institutional reality: there are no formal policies addressing the welfare of ministers' widows. This gap between belief and practice raises urgent questions about how a church with clear biblical directives has failed to translate them into structural protections.

This failure is particularly striking given the central role that ministers' wives play in the life of the church. CCAP ministers serve as influential community leaders, and their wives are expected to function as active, though unpaid, partners in ministry. A minister's wife finds her identity and social standing inextricably linked to her husband's position (Apawo-Phiri, 2007). She is formed in this identity through years of expectation and service: leading the Women's Guild, hosting congregational activities, providing hospitality to visitors, and embodying the ideal of Christian womanhood. The honorific "Mama Muliska" is not merely a title but a formation - a way of being shaped by the church's expectations and rewarded with its esteem.

The institutional importance placed on the wife becomes evident in the CCAP Conditions of Service (2024), which explicitly state that male ministers must be married before ordination. The church requires a wife to perform ministry. Yet the Synod's Practice and Procedure (2018) omits any mention of spouses in its provisions for ongoing support. Benefits are tied exclusively to the minister's active service rather than providing a continuum of care for the surviving spouse (Mhlabane, 2017; Mavuso, 2016). The woman who was essential to her husband's ministry becomes institutionally invisible the moment his service ends. This raises a critical question that will emerge as central to this study: if ministers' wives are formed in an identity entirely dependent on their husbands' position, what happens to that identity when the husband dies? And how might the church need to rethink this formation?

The vulnerability created by this institutional gap is compounded by the broader sociocultural landscape of widowhood in Malawi. Widows frequently encounter property grabbing (Lomba, 2014) and stigma (Lwanda, 2010). Traditional practices such as *chokolo* (levirate marriage) and *kupita kufa* (sexual cleansing) remain culturally sanctioned violations that expose widows to health risks and further marginalization (Kapuma, 2018). Recent research in Mzuzu corroborates that widows experience compounded trauma through familial abandonment and economic precarity (Chipolombwe et al., 2024). Within this context, the Synod's failure to act as a buffer for its own widows leaves them even more exposed to these systemic societal ills. The church that helped form their identity as "Mama Muliska" abandons them precisely when that identity collapses.

Despite the prominent role of ministers' wives and the clear vulnerability of widows, there is a distinct lack of empirical research specifically on ministers' widows within the CCAP Synod of Livingstonia. No study has examined how these women are formed in their identity, how that formation prepares them (or fails to prepare them) for the possibility of widowhood, or what might need to change in that formation. This critical gap underscores the necessity of the current study, which seeks to give voice to those rendered invisible, to document the institutional factors that perpetuate their marginalization, and to ask how the church might form ministers' wives differently - in an identity that can survive their husbands' death.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This section reviews scholarship on ministers' widows and establishes conceptual tools for understanding their experiences. It argues that existing literature has not adequately addressed how ministers' wives are formed in

an identity that renders them vulnerable to institutional invisibility upon widowhood. By examining the concepts of Mama Muliska, status paradox, and institutional invisibility, and by integrating Sustainable Livelihood and Pastoral Care frameworks, this study develops a lens for understanding both material and identity dimensions of widowhood.

Mama Muliska, Status Paradox, and Institutional Invisibility

"Mama Muliska" (literally "Mother of the Shepherd/Minister" in Tumbuka) or "Mayi Busa" (in Chichewa) is an honorific title designating the wife of an ordained minister within the CCAP and similar Malawian church contexts. The term connotes not merely marital status but a recognized informal role: she is expected to serve as a model Christian woman, lead the Women's Guild, host congregational activities, provide hospitality, and support her husband's ministry without formal remuneration or official recognition. More than a role, "Mama Muliska" represents an identity, a way of being formed over years through expectation, service, and communal esteem.

Longwe (2019a) provides comprehensive analysis of this phenomenon in the Malawian context, examining how Baptist pastors' wives navigate the tension between their influential informal role and exclusion from formal decision-making. She documents how these women are formed through teaching, modeling, and communal expectation to understand their value as derived from their husbands' calling. Andor (2013) documents similar dynamics across African contexts, noting that "the pastor's wife functions as an unpaid associate pastor, yet her welfare is entirely dependent on her husband's continued employment." The formation is thus structural: she is shaped to serve but not to be secure in her own right.

Apawo-Phiri (2007) analyzes how Presbyterian structures in Malawi have historically relegated women's contributions to the domestic sphere, rendering their labor invisible to institutional accounting. This invisibility is formative: when a woman's work is never formally recognized, she learns that her value is not inherent but attached to her husband's position. Mhlabane (2017) observes that this informal role creates a "dependency trap" where the wife's identity and livelihood remain tethered to her husband's professional standing, a trap that is both economic and psychological.

Building directly from this concept, the "status paradox" refers to the contradictory position occupied by ministers' widows who, during their husbands' lifetimes, enjoy elevated standing within the church community as active ministry partners, yet upon bereavement experience sudden institutional abandonment and social marginalization. This paradox reveals how women's status is derivatively attached through marriage rather than inherent and evaporates precisely when most needed. Research on widowhood in Africa has documented what scholars call the "double standard of widowhood" (Eze et al., 2024), where widows face unique vulnerabilities that widowers do not. Mhlabane (2017) documents this among South African clergy widows, noting that "the very community that elevated her as 'Mama' during her husband's life becomes the site of her marginalization after his death." Kathenya (2022) identifies a similar dynamic in Kenyan Pentecostal contexts, describing it as a "betrayal of covenant community." Longwe (2019b) terms this a "paradox of equality" in Malawian church contexts: women serve actively but remain institutionally invisible.

"Institutional invisibility" describes the systematic absence of widows from formal organizational structures, policies, and records, rendering them non-existent institutionally despite their physical presence and prior contributions. It operates through procedural invisibility (no processes for supporting widows), documentary invisibility (no mention in policies), and representational invisibility (no voice in decision-making). Kota (2019) developed the concept of "Seven Invisibilities" faced by widows in India, arguing that invisibility is systematic rather than accidental built into governing structures. Say (2018a, 2018b) documented similar dynamics in Myanmar, framing this invisibility as "structural violence" linked to gender hierarchy. Kathenya (2022) applies the concept to clergy widows in Kenya, observing that "the church that celebrated her husband's ministry and benefited from her unpaid labor has no administrative mechanism for recognizing her once he is gone." In this study, institutional invisibility is substantiated by documentary analysis revealing complete silence about widows in Synod policy documents.

The Landscape of Ministers' Widows

The experiences of ministers' widows represent a critical concern across denominations and contexts, yet empirical evidence consistently reveals widespread failure of church institutions to provide adequate support despite clear biblical imperatives (Nicolaidis, 2022; Nwankwor & Okolo, 2021). Research on clergy widows spans multiple geographic contexts, revealing consistent patterns of marginalization (Lopata, 2017; Jegan, 2020). Common challenges include sudden loss of housing tied to the spouse's position (Buckland & Spotton Visano, 2022), identity disruption following loss of the ministerial role (Mhlabane, 2017), and inadequate pastoral care for complicated grief (Neimeyer & Burke, 2017).

Across Africa, the challenges of clergy widowhood are compounded by patriarchal cultural systems, traditional practices, and the legacies of missionary-established church structures that failed to adapt to local contexts (Babarinde, 2025; Longwe, 2012). In South Africa, Mhlabane (2017) documents how clergy widows experience "social death" following their husbands' deaths. In Kenya, Kathenya (2022) analyzes the institutional invisibility of pastors' widows in Pentecostal churches. In Nigeria, Babarinde (2025) examines faith-based and cultural approaches to grief support, finding that extended family networks are increasingly insufficient, yet churches have not developed adequate alternatives.

These regional patterns find expression in the Malawian context. Research consistently identifies property grabbing (Lomba, 2014), stigma and social isolation (Lwanda, 2010), and harmful traditional practices such as *chokolo* (levirate marriage) and *kupita kufa* (sexual cleansing) as persistent challenges (Kapuma, 2018). Recent research in Mzuzu corroborates that widows experience compounded trauma through familial abandonment and economic precarity (Chipolombwe et al., 2024). Within this broader context, Presbyterian structures have historically marginalized women's leadership (Apawo-Phiri, 2007), and pastors' wives experience a "paradox of equality", serving actively but remaining institutionally invisible (Longwe, 2019a).

What existing literature has not adequately addressed is the question of formation: how are ministers' wives prepared for the possibility of widowhood? How does their identity formation over decades of ministry contribute to vulnerability? This study addresses these gaps.

Existing Support Structures for Ministers' Widows

Research indicates that denominations with formal, written widow policies report significantly higher satisfaction among affected families (Chaves, 2004). Some denominations have developed pension provisions, housing allowances, or continued health insurance access for surviving spouses. However, even in well-resourced Western contexts, implementation remains inconsistent (Reeves, 2023).

Across Africa, formal support structures remain rare. In South Africa, Mavuso (2016) examines the Assemblies of God in Zululand, finding that while the denomination has made some provision for pastors' widows, implementation remains inconsistent and dependent on individual congregational goodwill. In Nigeria, Nwankwor and Okolo (2021) apply Acts 6:1-7 to argue that the contemporary church's neglect of widows represents a failure to apply New Testament patterns of diaconal care.

Turning to the specific context of this study, critical examination of the CCAP Synod of Livingstonia's foundational governance documents including the Constitution (2018), Standing Orders (2020), and Conditions of Service (2024) reveals complete institutional silence on the welfare of ministers' widows. The sole reference appears in the Church Government Practice and Procedure (2018), which states that a minister's widow "shall continue to receive benefits until remarriage." However, the document specifies no details regarding the nature, amount, duration, or administration of these benefits. This "policy ambiguity" (Chaves, 2004) transforms what should be an institutional right into an uncertain privilege subject to discretionary interpretation. The structural flaw becomes evident when considering that the Conditions of Service (2024) require male ministers to be married before ordination, positioning the wife as institutionally necessary for the husband's career yet institutionally invisible once his service ends.

Theoretical Perspectives: Integrating Sustainable Livelihoods and Pastoral Care

To address the multifaceted nature of ministers' widows' marginalization including both material losses and identity crisis, this study utilizes an integrated theoretical framework combining the Sustainable Livelihood Framework (SLF) and the Pastoral Care Model (PCM). This dual approach bridges material survival and spiritual well-being, economic vulnerability, and identity collapse.

Pioneered by Chambers and Conway (1992) and developed by DFID (1999), the SLF serves as a structural lens to analyze material conditions and erosion of livelihood assets following a minister's death. The framework focuses on five core capitals: financial, human, social, physical, and natural. By examining these assets, the SLF identifies how systemic barriers such as abrupt eviction from church housing and cessation of stipends, lead to severe vulnerability (Natarajan et al., 2022). For ministers' widows, the SLF reveals how the loss of a husband triggers simultaneous collapse across multiple capital domains, including the loss of social capital that constituted her identity as "Mama Muliska."

Complementing this material analysis, the PCM examines how deteriorating material conditions intersect with widows' spiritual and psychological health. Rooted in Louw's (2008) work emphasizing *cura vitae* the healing of life, the model moves the church's responsibility from mere charity to structured therapeutic accompaniment (Swinton & Mowat, 2006; Ojore, 2023). The PCM is essential because it addresses the identity crisis that the SLF cannot fully capture. When a widow says, "I even fail to pray because I don't understand myself" (R001), she describes not merely material loss but the collapse of self. Pastoral care that does not address this identity crisis is inadequate.

The integration of SLF and PCM ensures holistic understanding of widows lived realities. In the context of African women's experiences, spiritual and material realms are deeply intertwined and mutually reinforcing (Oduyoye, 2001; Sulumba-Kapuma, 2018). The SLF reveals erosion of physical, financial, and human assets, while the PCM highlights spiritual and emotional deprivations. These vulnerabilities are mutually reinforcing, manse eviction leads to social isolation and spiritual disorientation, while stigma prevents widows from accessing informal networks that might help rebuild financial assets.

Research Gap and Contribution

Despite the prominent role of ministers' wives and the clear vulnerability of their widows, there is a distinct lack of empirical research specifically on ministers' widows within the CCA Synod of Livingstonia. No study has systematically examined their lived experiences, available support mechanisms, or institutional factors perpetuating their marginalization. Most critically, no study has examined how these women are formed in their identity as "Mama Muliska" and how that formation contributes to vulnerability upon widowhood. This study addresses these gaps by centering widows' voices, analyzing institutional structures that render them invisible, and asking what it means to form women for ministry in ways that prepare them not only for service but also for the possibility of loss. By integrating empirical research with theological reflection, this study contributes both to scholarly literature on widowhood and to the practical task of church reform.

DATA AND METHOD

This study employed an exploratory qualitative design within an interpretive paradigm, understanding widowhood as a socially constructed and context-specific experience shaped by institutional, cultural, and theological dynamics (Kironko & Oduyo, 2020). A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study sought to examine lived experiences, identity formation, and meaning-making processes that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measures. Rather than aiming for statistical generalization, the study prioritizes depth of understanding and analytical insight into how ministers' widows experience and interpret their transition from recognized ministry partners to institutional invisibility.

Purposive sampling was used to recruit 25 participants, comprising 10 ministers' widows, 9 church elders, and 6 Synod officials. Selection of widows was guided by specific criteria: participants had to have been widowed for at least one year and whose husbands died while still in active ministerial service. This ensured that

participants could reflect beyond the immediate period of bereavement while remaining closely connected to the institutional processes under study (Butina, 2015; Kanyuka, 2018). Including church elders and Synod officials enabled triangulation between lived experience and institutional perspective, strengthening the analytical depth of the study.

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to articulate sensitive experiences related to grief, identity, and institutional support (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009), complemented by participant observation to capture unarticulated social dynamics (Kapuma, 2018). Documentary analysis of key Synod governance texts, including the Constitution (2018), Standing Orders (2020), Conditions of Service (2024), and Church Government Practice and Procedure (2018), provided institutional context. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework and interpreted through Osmer's (2008) four tasks. To ensure trustworthiness, the study applied triangulation across data sources, maintained close alignment between data and interpretation, and provided sufficient contextual detail to support transferability to similar ecclesial settings

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Four Tasks of Theological Interpretation

This section presents data gathered from the CCAP Synod of Livingstonia, interpreted through the Sustainable Livelihood Framework (SLF) and Pastoral Care Model (PCM), and organized according to Osmer's four tasks of practical theological interpretation. Triangulating narratives from widows with insights from church leaders and documentary analysis reveals systemic vulnerability at the centre of which lies a crisis of identity. Women formed over decades as "Mama Muliska" discover upon widowhood that this identity is not sustained by institutional structures once the minister dies.

Descriptive Task: The Lived Realities of Widowhood

The descriptive task documents what is happening to ministers' widows. Three interconnected dimensions emerge: financial collapse, social marginalization, and spiritual disorientation.

Financial Collapse and Livelihood Erosion

Bereavement triggered an immediate and severe disruption to widows' economic stability. Participants consistently described a sudden transition from relative security to financial precarity. One widow explained that life became "a hand-to-mouth existence, relying entirely on the benevolence of well-wishers" (R001). Another noted that she could no longer meet basic household needs or sustain her children's education following her husband's death. A central source of distress was the expectation to vacate church housing immediately after the funeral. One participant recounted, "The same day we buried him, they told me to leave the manse. I had nowhere to go" (R007), while another shared, "People said, 'Why are you still in the manse? It is not yours anymore.' I felt like a thief in my own home" (R008). These narratives illustrate the abrupt loss of both income and shelter, often occurring simultaneously and without transitional support.

Participants further linked their vulnerability to prior expectations surrounding the role of a minister's wife. Several widows reported that they had discontinued formal employment upon their husbands' ordination, in line with church and cultural expectations. As one widow stated, "I had no job, no skills, because they told me to stop working when he was ordained. When he died, I was left with nothing" (R004). Another reflected, "We believed the call to ministry would take care of us" (R005). These accounts indicate that economic dependency was not incidental but structurally reinforced over time through role expectations associated with "Mama Muliska."

From a Sustainable Livelihood Framework perspective, these experiences represent a rapid depletion of financial and physical capital following a major livelihood shock (Chambers & Conway, 1992; DFID, 1999). The immediate loss of income and housing significantly constrains widows' ability to maintain basic living standards or pursue alternative livelihood strategies. This finding aligns with broader research demonstrating that loss of

spousal income can precipitate acute financial vulnerability in already constrained contexts (Buckland & Spotton Visano, 2022). In this study, however, the impact is intensified by institutional arrangements that tie both income and housing directly to the minister's active service, leaving widows without continuity of support.

The data also reveal how institutional expectations contribute to long-term vulnerability. The discouragement of independent economic activity among ministers' wives reflects what Mhlabane (2017) describes as a "dependency trap," in which women's livelihoods remain structurally tied to their husbands' roles. In the CCAP Synod of Livingstonia, this dynamic is reinforced by the absence of formal mechanisms to support widows after bereavement. As a result, the loss of a husband is not only an emotional and relational rupture but also a systemic economic collapse, exposing widows to sustained precarity.

Social Marginalization and Status Erosion

Widows reported a marked decline in social standing following their husbands' deaths. Participants described a shift from being publicly recognized as "Mama Muliska" to experiencing neglect and exclusion. One widow stated, "When he was alive, they called me Mama Muliska. Now, it is as if I never existed" (R009). Others noted that respect within the congregation "automatically diminishes" after bereavement (R609). These accounts point to a rapid erosion of social identity and belonging within the church community.

In addition to loss of recognition, widows experienced increased suspicion and stigmatization. Several participants reported being monitored or judged in their interactions with male ministers. One widow recounted being accused of inappropriate behavior simply for accepting assistance: "I was accused of having an affair just because someone gave me a lift to the hospital" (R003). Others described being labelled with derogatory terms, leading to withdrawal from church and community life. Observation data confirmed patterns of self-isolation, with some widows deliberately distancing themselves to avoid scrutiny.

These experiences reflect a significant loss of social capital, understood within the Sustainable Livelihood Framework as a key resource for support and resilience (DFID, 1999). The findings resonate with Mhlabane's (2017) description of "social death," where widows lose recognition and relational networks following bereavement. In this context, however, the loss is closely tied to institutional identity: respect is not sustained beyond the husband's ministry but is contingent upon it. This reinforces the status paradox identified in this study, where elevated recognition during marriage gives way to marginalization upon widowhood.

Spiritual Disorientation and Pastoral Abandonment

Widows described profound spiritual and emotional distress following bereavement, often expressed as a loss of inner coherence, and meaning. Participants spoke of "sleepless nights" (R002) and lives "broken into pieces" (R007). One widow captured this disorientation by stating, "I even fail to pray because I don't understand myself" (R001). This reflects not only grief but a deeper disruption of identity and spiritual agency.

Despite this level of distress, participants consistently reported an absence of structured pastoral support. Widows indicated that no formal systems existed to accompany them through grief, with one stating plainly, "There is no support system" (R001–R010). While some church leaders perceived counselling as available but underutilized, widows' accounts suggest that such support was either inaccessible or insufficient. In response, many developed individual coping strategies, including withdrawal, or increased personal religious activity, often in isolation.

From a pastoral care perspective, these experiences point to a gap in what Louw (2008) describes as *cura vitae*, the healing and sustaining of life. The absence of intentional accompaniment leaves widows to navigate both grief and identity reconstruction alone. This aligns with Neimeyer and Burke's (2017) understanding of complicated grief, where loss disrupts not only emotional stability but also meaning-making processes. In this study, spiritual disorientation is closely linked to the collapse of the "Mama Muliska" identity, leaving widows without a coherent sense of self within the church. The lack of pastoral response therefore represents not only a care deficit but a failure to address a critical dimension of widowhood.

While the descriptive task has highlighted the lived realities of financial collapse, social marginalisation, and spiritual disorientation, these experiences require deeper interpretation. The focus now shifts from what is happening to why it is happening. The interpretive task therefore examines the structural, cultural, and institutional dynamics that produce and sustain this vulnerability across multiple domains of life.

Interpretive Task: Understanding Systemic Vulnerability

The marginalization of ministers' widows emerges from interacting institutional, cultural, and structural dynamics that collectively produce sustained vulnerability across economic, social, and spiritual dimensions.

At the institutional level, Synod governance documents reveal a significant and consistent gap. The Constitution (2018), Standing Orders (2020), and Biennial Meeting records contain no substantive provisions for widows' welfare, despite the Conditions of Service (2024) requiring ministers to be married prior to ordination. The only reference appears in Church Government Practice and Procedure (2018), which states that a widow may receive benefits until remarriage, yet it provides no definition of eligibility, duration, or administrative procedure. This lack of specification creates what Chaves (2004) describes as policy ambiguity, where support exists in principle but is not operationally guaranteed. As one church official noted, formalizing such support would transform it from discretionary goodwill into institutional obligation (R601). Consequently, widows occupy a precarious position in which access to support depends on interpretation, leadership disposition, or congregational goodwill rather than enforceable policy.

Cultural expectations further intensify this vulnerability through long-standing constructions of the minister's wife as economically dependent and institutionally secondary. Participant accounts indicate that many wives were encouraged, and at times expected, to withdraw from formal employment upon their husbands' ordination, aligning with interpretations found in Rebuli (2008) and Ruwona (2003). While this arrangement is often justified as a means of ensuring availability for ministry responsibilities, it has long-term structural consequences. It limits skill retention, reduces economic independence, and restricts opportunities for livelihood diversification. Mhlabane (2017) conceptualizes this as a "dependency trap," where women's economic identity becomes fully embedded in their husbands' ministerial status, leaving them without autonomous means of survival upon widowhood.

These institutional and cultural dynamics are embedded within broader patriarchal ecclesial systems that construct women's identity as derivative rather than intrinsic (Apawo-Phiri, 2007). Within such systems, recognition, authority, and material security are mediated through male clerical office. As a result, widowhood represents not only the loss of a spouse but also the collapse of institutional identity and social standing. Participants' accounts of stigma, surveillance, and suspicion illustrate how informal social norms reinforce this structural positioning. Nussbaum (2004) suggests that such dynamics function as moral emotions that regulate women's behavior through shame and social judgment, further narrowing their space for agency.

When these layers are considered together, they produce reinforcing forms of vulnerability. The loss of financial and physical capital, as conceptualized in the Sustainable Livelihood Framework (Chambers & Conway, 1992; DFID, 1999), intersects with diminished social capital and weakened institutional recognition. This is compounded by spiritual disorientation, as described in pastoral care literature (Louw, 2008), where the collapse of identity disrupts meaning-making processes. Economic insecurity deepens social withdrawal, while stigma restricts access to supportive networks, creating a cycle of isolation and dependency. The convergence of these factors sustains the status paradox at the center of this study, in which elevated recognition during marriage is replaced by invisibility and exclusion upon widowhood.

The interpretive analysis shows that vulnerability is not only material or institutional but also deeply existential. Loss of income and housing is accompanied by a collapse of meaning, belonging, and spiritual coherence. The next task therefore moves from explanation to evaluation, asking what theological resources exist to assess this situation and what the church understands about its responsibility toward widows.

Normative Task: Theological Foundations for Church Response

The findings raise a fundamental theological question concerning the obligations of the church toward ministers' widows as members of a covenantal community. Across Scripture, care for widows is consistently presented as

a marker of faithful communal life (Deut. 10:18; Ps. 68:5; Jas. 1:27), not as optional benevolence but as an expression of divine justice and covenantal obedience. Neglect of widows, therefore, represents not only administrative weakness but a theological failure to embody the ethical demands of scripture.

Within the Reformed tradition, the church is understood as a covenant community bound by mutual responsibility and ordered care (Calvin, Institutes IV.1.3). Ministry is not an isolated vocation, but a relational calling sustained by both ordained ministers and their families. Ministers' wives, though often occupying informal and unpaid roles, participate meaningfully in the life and mission of the church through hospitality, leadership in women's ministries, and congregational care. The requirement that ministers be married implicitly affirms this participation as functionally significant to ecclesial life. However, the absence of structured provision for widows reveals a disjunction between theological affirmation and institutional practice. What is theologically recognized during ministry is practically abandoned at its end.

African feminist theology further strengthens this critique by emphasizing the intrinsic dignity and agency of women as full subjects within ecclesial life (Oduyoye, 2001; Apawo-Phiri, 2007). It challenges systems that define women primarily through relational identity rather than personhood. The findings of this study demonstrate that ministers' wives are formed within such a system, where identity, respect, and security are derived from their husbands' office. Upon widowhood, this constructed identity collapses, producing not only material vulnerability but also existential dislocation. The widow's sense of self is destabilized because the institutional framework that previously affirmed her role ceases to recognize her.

This theological tension indicates that the marginalization of widows cannot be understood merely as a policy gap or administrative oversight. It reflects a deeper inconsistency between ecclesiological conviction and institutional practice. If the church is to be faithful to its own theological foundations, it must move beyond episodic or charitable responses toward structured justice, which includes both material provision and the reconfiguration of how identity is formed within ministry contexts. This requires recognizing ministers' wives not only as partners in service but as persons whose dignity and belonging do not expire with their husbands' office.

Taken together, these theological perspectives suggest that meaningful reform must address both structure and formation. Structural reform ensures continuity of care, while rethinking formation ensures that women are not shaped into identities that collapse under conditions of loss. Faithfulness, therefore, demands a church that aligns its practices with its theological commitments to justice, covenant care, and human dignity.

If the normative task clarifies what the church ought to be doing, the next step is to consider how these theological insights can be translated into practice. The pragmatic task therefore moves from theological evaluation to concrete institutional, pastoral, and structural responses capable of addressing the vulnerabilities identified in the previous sections.

Pragmatic Task: Toward Institutional and Pastoral Response

Addressing the marginalization of ministers' widows requires coordinated institutional, theological, and pastoral reform. At the institutional level, the most urgent priority is the development of a formal Widowhood Welfare Policy embedded within Synod governance structures. Such a policy should replace existing ambiguity with clearly defined provisions for housing transition, financial support linked to years of service, access to healthcare, and educational support for dependents. The current remarriage clause requires revision because it unintentionally links economic security to marital status rather than need or service history. Formalizing these provisions would shift widow care from discretionary practice to institutional obligation grounded in justice.

Beyond policy reform, there is need to reconfigure the formation of ministers' wives. Current expectations that discourage independent economic activity contribute to long-term structural vulnerability. Formation processes should affirm women's identity as grounded in their calling in God, while also supporting continued education, skills development, and economic participation. This would reduce dependency without undermining ministry partnership.

Economic empowerment initiatives are also essential. These should include access to savings schemes, vocational training, and small enterprise support for both ministers' wives and widows. For widows, targeted reintegration support such as start-up capital and educational assistance for children would help restore disrupted livelihoods and rebuild agency within the Sustainable Livelihoods framework (Chambers & Conway, 1992; DFID, 1999).

In parallel, pastoral care must be institutionalized rather than ad hoc. Structured grief counselling, peer support groups, and trained pastoral teams should accompany widows beyond the funeral period. This reflects Louw's (2008) emphasis on *cura vitae*, where care extends to meaning reconstruction and identity healing. Importantly, congregational teaching is needed to address stigma and social suspicion, ensuring that widows remain visible and fully integrated within the life of the church.

Taken together, these pragmatic proposals point to a necessary shift from informal, discretionary responses to structured and accountable ecclesial care. The marginalization of ministers' widows is not resolved through isolated acts of compassion but through intentional institutional reform that aligns policy, formation, and pastoral practice with theological conviction. What emerges is a call for the Synod to move from a system that inadvertently produces vulnerability to one that actively safeguards dignity, continuity, and belonging. This shift is not only administrative but ecclesiological, requiring the church to re-examine how it defines ministry, family, and care within its life. It is within this broader reconfiguration that the concluding chapter reflects on the implications of the findings and draws together the study's theological, institutional, and practical contributions toward a more just and coherent response to ministers' widows.

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited by its focus on a single synod within the CCAP tradition, which may affect the transferability of findings to other denominational or cultural contexts. The purposive sample of 25 participants was appropriate for qualitative depth but does not allow for statistical generalization. In addition, the reliance on retrospective self-reported narratives may introduce recall and interpretive bias, although triangulation with church officials and documentary analysis was used to strengthen credibility. Despite these limitations, the study provides analytically rich insights into institutional, cultural, and theological dynamics shaping ministers' widows' experiences.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the experiences of ministers' widows within the CCAP Synod of Livingstonia through the lens of practical theological interpretation. The findings demonstrate that widowhood within this context is not only a personal or familial transition but also an institutional and theological concern. Widows experience simultaneous financial insecurity, social marginalization, and spiritual disorientation following the death of their husbands, revealing a pattern of vulnerability that is both systemic and structured.

At the centre of these experiences is a status paradox in which women are highly valued as "Mama Muliska" during their husbands' ministry yet rendered invisible upon their deaths. This paradox is sustained by institutional silence in Synod governance documents, cultural expectations that reinforce economic dependency, and ecclesial structures that assign women a derivative identity linked to their husbands' status. As a result, widowhood becomes a moment of both material collapse and identity disruption.

Theologically, this situation conflicts with biblical imperatives that place care for widows at the heart of faithful community life, as well as Reformed understandings of the church as a covenant community. It also challenges African feminist theological insights that affirm women's inherent dignity and reject identity formation based solely on relational dependency. Taken together, these perspectives call for both structural reform and a rethinking of how ministers' wives are formed within the life of the church.

The study proposes that addressing this challenge requires more than ad hoc support. It requires a formalized Widowhood Welfare Policy, transformation in identity formation of ministers' wives, strengthened economic

empowerment, structured pastoral care, and intentional cultural change within congregations. These interventions together point toward a more just and theologically consistent ecclesial practice.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that the CCAP Synod of Livingstonia has an opportunity to move from institutional invisibility to intentional care, ensuring that women who have long contributed to ministry are not abandoned at the point of greatest vulnerability. Such reform would align institutional practice with theological conviction and restore dignity, visibility, and belonging to ministers' widows within the church.

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