

**IMPLICATIONS OF THE SEVENTH DAY ADVENTIST (SDA) CHURCH  
TEACHINGS ON LEVIRATE PRACTICE AMONG ABAGUSII OF ITUMBE  
STATION, KENYA**

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the Requirement for The Award of Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Religious  
Studies in The School of Arts and Social Sciences, Department of Philosophy and  
Religious Studies**

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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this research thesis to my beloved husband Peter Nyamongo Getui, our beloved children and grandchildren.

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## ABSTRACT

In traditional Abagusii, marriage is considered as one of the most important institutions in one's life. Among the various forms of marriages practiced, Levirate union was highly recognized because of its vital role in supporting families when the husband dies and leaves the wife (widow) without an heir. The SDA church considers this practice a form of cohabiting, polygamy and regards it as a form of vice. The purpose of the study was to examine the implications of the Church teachings on levirate practice among Abagusii Community in Itumbe Station of Seventh Day Adventist Church, Kisii, Kenya. The study was guided by the following specific objectives: to examine the SDA church teachings on levirate practice in Itumbe station, Kenya; to assess the effectiveness of the church support/programs for widows in the SDA church, to evaluate the factors influencing the practice of levirate custom among the Abagusii community, and finally, to determine the challenges facing levirate unions in Itumbe Station, Kenya. The study was informed by three theories: Structural Functional Theory (SFT) by Durkheim (1858-1917), and Family Systems Theory (FST) by Bowen Murray in 1960s. A descriptive research design was used in the study. The target population was 774 respondents who included, pastors, family members, Widows, Abagusii council of elders and family life leaders, with a sample size of 250 respondents. Data collection tools were a questionnaire for quantitative data, interview schedules and Focus Group Discussions for qualitative data. A pilot study was conducted to test the reliability of the study instruments with the Pentecostal Assemblies of God (PAG) church in Nyamira County. Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics and presented using graphs, pie charts and tables; while qualitative data was analyzed and presented thematically in the form of verbatim reporting. The study found out that despite the SDA church doctrine teach against Abagusii levirate custom, there are members of the church who still practice it. There is a double life style lived by her membership which the church cannot ignore. The church should engage herself to research on the practice for better understanding of its persistence within her membership. It concluded that it is not proper for the SDA church to completely denounce the practice and subject widows who opt for the custom in her membership into humiliation when it does not have comprehensive widow support systems that take care of the widows. The Abagusii levirate custom has positive elements that can be incorporated into Christian marriage. The study recommended that the SDA church should open up and adopt the theology of inculturation as an alternative approach that incorporates the positive aspects of Abagusii levirate custom as a way to contextualize the Christian message on marriage.



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## ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

<b>SDA:</b>	Seventh Day Adventist
<b>PAG:</b>	Pentecostal Assemblies of God
<b>OT:</b>	Old Testament
<b>NT:</b>	New Testament
<b>KNBS:</b>	Kenya National Bureau of Statistics
<b>SKC:</b>	South Kenya Conference
<b>NGOs:</b>	Non-governmental Organizations
<b>SFT:</b>	Structural Functional Theory
<b>FST:</b>	Family Systems Theory
<b>FGDs:</b>	Focus Group Discussions
<b>NACOSTI:</b>	National Commission for Science Technology and Innovation
<b>SPSS:</b>	Statistical Package for Social Sciences

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Background of the Study

Following the traditions of both the Old Testament (OT) and New Testament (NT), Christian church teaches that marriage is a permanent union between a man and a woman coming together to form one flesh, bound by mutual consent and solemnized by the church minister (Matthew (19:1-12; Mark10:1-12). This forms the essential principle of biblical theology of marriage for Christians and anything outside of it is not marriage at all. Other goals of marriage like consummation that culminates in child-bearing, companionship and reciprocal love relationship between husband and wife are anchored on this first fundamental principle. Therefore, any Christian marriage should reflect and maintain all these essential elements for it to be recognized as a marriage. Based on these elements, the position of the church informed by the Holy Scriptures (1 Timothy 5:14) on widows and widowers, is that they are free to remarry. In accordance with the directive of Scripture and the church, the person to marry a widow should not necessarily be her deceased husband's brother, but any man that she chooses to attend to her affective and sexual needs. This therefore means that unions like polygamy, levirate and so forth are not considered legitimate marriages at all, and therefore not accepted by the church, even though they may contain fundamental values and practiced in the OT.

The undeniable fact was that the practice of levirate marriage is found in almost all communities in the world, including the Judeo-Christian traditions. A number of Old Testament texts supported the custom of levirate unions. For instance, the well-known story of Judah and Tamar: "Then Judah said to Onan, go in to your brother's wife, and

perform your duty as a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother” (Gen. 38: 8). In Deuteronomy 25:5-10, a brother would raise children for him, especially a male to carry on his lineage and name, his deceased brother's wife. This was why a son had to be born to take his late father’s name. Informed by these texts, Williams (2012) noted that levirate marriage law is supported by the Holy Scriptures. The same was reiterated by Robison (2012: 1) who argued that levirate marriage was a standard union where God is perceived to prefer that males only wed members of their tribe. Paul seems to be implementing the same Torah command to marry a brother's widow in the New Testament, particularly in Timothy 5: 14–16, especially where there is no male heir. Levirate marriage is regarded by the Holy Scriptures as a common marriage regulation among the ancient Hebrews, Schwimmer (2003) remarked.

Another practice similar to levirate unions but often unmentioned even though is practiced in some communities, particularly in Africa is sororate marriage. Sororate is a practice where the widower is allowed to marry one of her deceased wife’s sisters in order to take care of the widower, the deceased sister’s children and also to procreate for the deceased sister (Ogolla, 2014). The communities embracing this kind of union do it on the basis that the paid dowry cannot be returned to the family of the deceased widow. For instance, among the Tsonga people of South Africa, a man takes up a sister or a close cousin to take the place his dead wife. In most cases the one chosen was to be preferably, this is usually the younger sister or cousin of the deceased.

These cultural practices (levirate and sororate unions) receive a stern condemnation despite being practiced in the OT traditions. Furthermore, the Christian church, particularly the Seventh Day Adventist church tend to have a minimalistic or a myopic interpretation of the practice of levirate and sororate unions; it tends to reduce such unions

to only romance, thereby out-rightly undermining other important aspects that define them as stipulated in both Old and New Testaments Christian traditions and in cultures like the Abagusii that embrace levirate unions as a cultural practice. Since it does not consider those unions as authentic marriages, the Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) church advocates for the widowed to remarry. This raises lots of fundamental socio-ecclesial and cultural questions that this study addressed in favor of levirate or sorority unions: If the widow had children with the deceased and remarries, how are the children taken care of? Supposing the one marrying does not want the children of the widowed or does not have resources to take care of the children, what will become of those children?

Another contradicting aspect between the church's teaching and the same OT tradition on marriage is that of virginity. In the OT tradition which is advocated by the Christian church is that one should marry a virgin. From the perspective of the OT, particularly in the book of Leviticus, the high priest is required by the church to marry a virginal woman. He must only wed a virgin from his own people in order to prevent defiling his progeny among his people. He cannot wed a widow, a divorcee, or a prostitute. A divorcee, a widow, or a prostitute could not be married by a member of the Cohen caste (the top priests of the days of the Temple). With this case a widow is not a virgin, which from a socio-ecclesial perspective shows how widows were looked down upon since virginity was held as a virtue and not a vice. Besides this makes it difficult if not impossible to claim of remarriage of widows as propagated by the church, particularly the SDA church; it makes it hard to understand and regard remarriage of widows to be truly marriage. It is on the basis of this that the OT Prophets condemned Israel on how widows were being mistreated (Isaiah 1, 23; 10, 1-2; Jeremiah 7, 4-16) and left without any support from the society and immediate family members.

Additionally, when the white Christian missionaries came to Africa, they insisted on monogamy as the absolute Christian way and form of marriage; and that marriage ends on the death of the husband. However, to date this has caused a clash between the church, particularly the SDA church and the local Christian community that embraces both Christian faith and also the traditional cultural marriage customs like levirate unions, polygamy and so on. In the application of the church doctrine on marriage in reference to widowhood, the church advocates that a Christian widow or widower, should seek a Christian monogamous marriage instead and remarry (Davies, 2010). But, again from the perspective of this study, this stance of the church raises a series of important pastoral questions that this study sought to address: Should the widow divorce from her late husband's family and leaving behind her children? What relationship does a Christian widow have with her deceased brother's family including the deceased husband himself? Does the church have proper systems to care for widows and orphans in their times of need that could warrant them not to opt for a levirate union (James 1:27)? Is the church, together with all the financial constraints she is faced with prepared to confront this reality of the needy widows and orphans? The truth of the matter is that there are homes for the orphaned children but they are not funded enough; there are many children not properly taken care of, including the widows themselves in the church. Despite the condemnation of levirate practice among the faithful, the church seems not prepared to face this cultural reality that cannot be swept under the carpet. African societies, especially the Abagusii community practice levirate unions for various sound reasons that cannot be ignored or even reduced to the mere aspect of sexual intimacy that is deemed to undermine Christian marriage principles and morals.

Another reality that merited this study was that of the widow herself. The widow is confronted with various existential challenges ranging from social, economic and even religious. Widowed persons, especially women in poor contexts depend on their husbands for many things - financial support, care of the children if they have, her own emotional support, companionship, and so on. This implies that the demise of the husband creates a major and general loss in the realization of family and marriage roles, previously fulfilled by the husband. However, the most unfortunate reality on the ground is that the church does not recognize levirate union that could take charge of these lapses; the church does not have systems in place to take charge of the needs of those widowed. This in itself raised the concern of the study that the church needs to see levirate union beyond the theological principle of one-man and one-woman coming together to form one flesh bound by mutual consent (Mt. 19:1-12; Mk. 10:1-12) solemnized by the church minister. This is why this study considered research on levirate unions, particularly in communities practicing such unions within the purview of the SDA church to make a formidable theological and pastoral step in finding possible ways of reconciling the two marriage systems (Christian and Customary).

Another argument that informed this study was the general pastoral challenge of Christianity in Africa in relation to marriage, particularly the lack of recognition of customary marriage unions by white mission founded churches like the SDA church. From the perspective of this study, it was detrimental to both the Christian church and the cultural communities to simply condemn the practice of levirate marriage since widowhood is a nerve-wracking life situation that not only affects the widowed person, but also the Christian community, the orphaned children that are under his or her care, who in most cases have to manage the loss of one of their parents. The presence of both



partners makes marriage roles a shared responsibility. However, with the death of one spouse, this shared task becomes more demanding to the remaining partner, particularly the widows who may not have regular formal employment (Thompson & Walker, 1989) since it requires the widowed partner to solely take up family responsibilities. A study by Finger (2007) explained that in the ancient world, widows represented the most vulnerable and helpless class of people in society which needed lots of help and support systems as they adjust to life without their spouses by their side. In the socio-cultural perspective, levirate unions were encouraged to take the general care of the widow's needs and well-being.

From the global perspective, a study by Carr and Utz (2002) shows that in the US, a majority of widows never receive help during the period of grief and after. After the funeral, family members, friends, funeral committees, including Christian communities which assisted in early funeral arrangements of the dead spouse go their own ways, and rarely carry on with care-giving responsibility. The widow is left on her own in a whole new set of circumstances for which she has made little to no preparation and must now adapt to her new reality. The widow is left to live a lonely life, isolated, depressed, with no financial help as friends desert her, etc. This reality was reiterated by the Loomba Foundation (2016) global statistics which indicated that the US ranks the highest in the world with more than 14 million widowed people, where more than 740,000 of them are unable to provide themselves basic necessities like food, shelter and so on (United States Census Bureau). This situation informed this study pointing the fact that the community does not actually take care of the widows; they are left to themselves without alternatives of life. It put into question the role of faith-based institutions like the church and other organizations in the care of widows for the betterment of their own lives and of the

children in their care. This inadequate care from the community and the Church leads to many widows to engage in forbidden practices like cohabitation and prostitution for individual self-fulfillment, which can be quite detrimental to themselves and to their children (Haskins, et al., 2005).

According to an empirical study on widows, intersectionality, and the tale in Luke 18 by Marianne Kartzow and Loreen Maseno (2010), widows in Norway suffer a variety of difficulties depending on their religion, age, social class, money, and other characteristics. As a result of economic equality between men and women, widows inherit their husbands in the same way that widowers inherit their wives. The study's participants questioned whether it was still important for a woman to be a widow if she entered into a new relationship. Lifelong widowhood appears strange because a woman who has lost a husband could feel more like she is “unmarried” than “widow” after some time. Since her life has moved past the loss of her spouse, it seems pointless for her to continue to be a widow. This means that the option for a woman who has lost her husband is to marry again. According to Kartzow and Maseno (2010), when a woman loses her husband, she loses her status and prestige in the eyes of the media and popular culture. She also loses her social space, as her former friends stop inviting her because they see her as a social outcast or they are worried that she will flirt with their husbands. According to (Chambers, 2005), the same situation replicates itself in older widows, especially due to the fact that widowers seem to re-marry much faster and often with younger women. However, most of these widows find solace in the church where they form groups of social character that help them to heal their sorrow.

In Asia, widowhood is regarded a curse and many Asian cultures encourage disregard of widows by members of society, including close relatives (UN report, 2001). This leaves

many widows with the burden of solely caring for their children with virtually no help from relatives, friends and the even the Church. The report by United Nations (2001) showed that widows are deprived and stigmatized, exacerbated by ritual and religious rites. It contends that a woman receives social status from a man in Indian society, like in all other patriarchal countries. When the husband passes away, the widow loses all identity. For those who opt to remarry, upon remarriage, she has to relinquish guardianship of her children as well as any other property rights she may have. Because of the cultural attitude to widowhood, there is low rate of remarriage of widows, making street begging and prostitution a common way of life for younger widows while their young partial-orphaned children are forced to enter the labor force to support their widowed mothers and other orphaned siblings. A study by Chandrakant *et al* (2015) explained that many of the 16,000 widows in Vrindavan region have no choice but to beg in the streets, while some orphaned children as young as 10 years old are forced to spend much of their time making a living through prostitution. This pointed to the gap of the need to research and understand better the role of levirate unions that could take charge of some the issues raised.

In practically every community in Africa, levirate unions exist. The Supyire of Mali, the Akan of Ghana, the Igbos of Nigeria, the Nandi, Luo, and Kambas of Kenya, several groups in Zambia, Uganda, and Sudan, as well as the Yoruba of Nigeria all practiced it. In most societies, the widow chooses a brother-in-law to help in caring for the needs of the widow, the children, and protecting the family property of the deceased. Communities support levirate marriage because they do not want strangers to inherit property in a place where they do not have blood connections. This situation was reiterated by Bass and Kanabus (2004) in their study which pointed out that in Africa because of its lack of social

support systems widows are compelled to sell their own children into slavery or prostitution in order to help them shoulder household responsibilities; they are forced by circumstances to resort and support behaviors like condoning child labor, thereby ignoring the realities of child labor and prostitution, which have become worldwide problems of child abuse. Such widows do not see anything wrong with this since it helps them to get some economic resources to take of their families – they value the efforts of their children to support their families. The profound reason for such immoral behaviors is motivated by the fact that the services offered by their husbands vanish after their death, leaving widowed women to struggle alone with serious economic hardships; customary laws exclude widows from owning property in many societies in Africa leaving them with no support systems (World Bank Group, 2018).

By reducing sexual immorality in the traditional Luo culture, the adoption of the levirate practice contributes to the moral integrity of society (Ngore, 2012). In order to satisfy their basic intimate requirements, sexually active widows are supposed to have a socially acceptable sexual partner. Levirate unions with one of their in-laws may be a strategy to protect this by preventing them from engaging in indiscriminate sex with other males that could risk her life. In a levirate union, the widow continues to have relationships with a man who is legally her husband's replacement. The widow was prevented from engaging in promiscuity with outsiders who were not typically known by the deceased's family by the custom, which holds her in check. Levirate marriages are thought to belong to the deceased husband's children (Shorter 2001).

According to an empirical study by Maluleke (2012), if a man dies in South Africa, among the Zulu people, his wife is expected to choose from among the brothers or close relatives

of the deceased who will take care of her. As a customary practice, she is given sticks representing the possible brothers and relatives to select from and whoever is pictured by the stick becomes the one to care for her. The undeniable fact here is that elements of freedom of the widow to determine the person of her choice is respected and taken into account. It is the widow who freely chooses for the kinsman or brother in law to take care of her. This is against those who denounce levirate practice and all its embedded values on the basis that in such marriage the woman has no freedom to make her choice of whom to stay with under customary law.

In Nigeria, levirate unions are considered a custom of the Yoruba, the Igbo, and the Hausa-Fulani communities (Bamgbose, 2002). For instance, the Yoruba customarily permits a brother or son of the deceased husband, but not the son of the widowed woman, to take care of the widow. Instead, the elder son of the deceased husband is allowed to take the youngest wife of his father to care of her and bear children for his deceased father. However, with the influence of the Christian church that condemns the practice, a survey conducted by World Public Opinion (2009) indicated that 33% of Nigerian widows face discrimination from society, family and in the church compared to other women outside the church. This situation does not arise in situations where levirate unions are openly accepted since they receive support from their deceased husbands' brothers that take care of them. Afolayan (2004) states: "The death of the man or husband need not bring an end to the marriage. The woman may remain in her husband's homestead where she is regularly visited and supported by the surrogate husband (levir), or she may move to his homestead." This is basically because the widow is still considered being married to her late husband's family, and therefore the family have the responsibility to decide on her

next destination in that family. Because of this, the family has the right to disown a woman who chooses to act contrary to their advice (Fasoranti & Aruna, 2007).

In Zambia, a study by Varga (2006) indicates that Zambia is among the African countries hardest hit by HIV/AIDS living many couples widowed and 15% of children orphaned. While the study by UNICEF (2004) indicated that over one million Zambian children, 19% of those under the age of 18 lost their fathers leaving women with the responsibility of orphan care. In his study, Strickland (2004) found that female-headed households, particularly those whose husbands have passed away and have less access to agricultural land, are more likely than male-headed households to have to sell what little property they do have in order to cover household expenses. This suggests that widows are denied the opportunities for employment that are accessible, exposing them to a variety of societal risks.

Kenya is estimated to have 8 million widows, encompassing nearly 15% of the entire population (KNBS, 2016). A majority of these widows are in rural setup, living under extreme poverty. Among the Luo community, levirate marriage procedures are discussed by the elders (Mboya (1938). The widows choose the people to take care of them and their families, support them materially and in other needs from the family of her late husband (Ogolla, 2014). Widows search for possible guardians within the family setup and approach the preferred ones; they cannot live outside the context of the family of her dead husband. No widow is forced to have a man she never proposed to stay with in a levirate union. Sometimes, a man could decline and explain the reasons why he could not guard his brother's house. While some are literally persuaded to take care of the widows in their families. This gives a true state of affairs of levirate practice and disapproves the false claim that widows are forced into levirate unions by relatives. This practice helps to

lessen the number of needy widows and orphaned children in the society. The unreasonable thing which informed this study is that most widows are joined and participate in Church activities where it is expected that the churches they belong would address their plight and assist them to adjust and cope with the psycho-social challenges that come up with the death of their family member. But this is not the case, instead they are undermined, stigmatized and left alone without much support of whichever kind (Miruka, et al, 2015). Further, there are church orphaned children's homes that cater for the orphans in the provision of food, medical care, education and clothing, even though those provisions are not enough to properly cater for the many orphans. In addition, there are no such provisions for the widows, which leaves them unprotected from such lacks. Instead, the church is so silent about the care of widows in the various aspects of their needs; she invests less on widows who shoulder the heavy responsibility of taking care of the children left to them by their departed partner.

An empirical study by Miruka et al. (2015) revealed that widow care is not fully implemented in the Christian churches; there are structures of care for them in the church. If the church has to transform or find strategies to take up other socio-cultural and economic roles played by the dead husbands, then she has to collaborate with other entities and social structures to address the plight of widows. Bahemuka and Brockington (2004: 267) argued that levirate unions are ways of returning widowed women to normal active life after the hustle and bustle of the funeral of their beloved partners.

According to South Kenya Conference report (2020), Itumbe SDA church Station has 1551 widows with Amariba having 217 widows, Nyaguta with 325 widows, Boronyi with 172 widows, Nyakunguru with 166 widows, Kegochi with 99 widows, Igare with 189 widows, Nyansongo with 288 widows, and Sameta with 95 widows. This gives a total of

1551 widows from all the eight districts of Itumbe Station, which also informed the basis and reality of this study. The socio-ecclesial reality is that the Abagusii people who are also Christians in the SDA church in some clandestine manner practice levirate unions as a way of caring for the widow and her orphaned children despite the church's disapproval of the practice. Those who openly opt either openly or secretly for levirate union regardless of their role in the church are victimized and forced to migrate to other places to avoid stigmatization, thereby losing their church membership. The unfortunate thing is that the church condemns levirate practice but at the same time her responsibilities of care for the widows have declined or even absent. This leaves widowed members of the church, particularly those of the Seventh Day church without proper care. The noted gaps merited this study on the implications of the Seventh Day Adventist church teachings on levirate practice among the Abagusii community in selected churches of Itumbe Station, South Kenya Conference, Kenya.

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

In traditional Abagusii, marriage is considered the most important feature in one's life. This includes different forms of arrangements: eloping (forced marriage through dragging), formal traditional marriage, levirate marriage and sororal marriage. Traditional levirate marriage is justified by the values of taking care of the widows and their children upon the death of their husbands/fathers. In the Old Testament, levirate marriage, in which a widow was not permitted to marry someone outside the family (Deuteronomy 25:5–10), was also practiced by the Jews. For her security and protection, it is one of the brother of the deceased to take care of her welfare.



However, influenced by the Christian teachings, the SDA church believes in the sola scriptura meaning, only the scripture is the source of their belief, which recommends levirate union in the Old Testament (Genesis 38:8 and Deuteronomy 25:5-10), does not consider the levirate marriage as a social unit practiced by the Abagusii people who are also members of the SDA church. The church considers this practice a form of cohabiting, polygamy and other perceived vices, and members who are involved in levirate relationships are regarded as immoral in need of repentance. Such members, are denied fellowship with the rest. Those who stand firm in the faith, face the challenge of being stigmatized by church believers in the Christian community. The negative perceptions and mistreatment of those who opt for levirate unions force some of them to move away from both their villages and SDA church to join other churches in order to continue worshipping God peacefully, while continuing with the levirate marriage tradition. This weakens kinship ties and creates a clash between the church and Abagusii believers who esteem both the church and their traditions in regard to the reality of widowhood. This clash leads to the decline of all values related to levirate marriage in the Abagusii community. Furthermore, the SDA church condemns levirate practice and even does not put practical measures to enable the widows meet the demands of their everyday lives. Once a woman loses her husband, she is left to cope with the challenges of life alone. But throwing away traditional practices that help to uphold the same values preached by the SDA church is equally doing away with the church membership in the church.

### **1.3 General Objective of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the implications of the church teachings, particularly the SDA church on levirate practice among the Abagusii of Itumbe Station, Kenya.

#### **1.4 Specific Objectives of the Study**

This study was guided by the following specific objectives:

- i) To examine the Seventh Day Adventist church teachings on levirate practice in Itumbe Station, Kenya.
- ii) To assess the effectiveness of Church support programs for widows in the Seventh Day Adventist churches in Itumbe Station, Kenya.
- iii) To evaluate the factors influencing the practice of levirate custom among the Abagusii in Itumbe Station, Kenya.
- iv) To examine the challenges facing levirate practice in Seventh Day Adventist churches in Itumbe Station, Kenya.

#### **1.5 Research Questions**

1. What are the Seventh Day Adventist church teachings on levirate practice in Itumbe Station, Kenya?
2. What support systems or programs does the SDA church have to help widows in the Seventh Day Adventist churches in Itumbe Station, Kenya?
3. What influences the practice of levirate custom among the Abagusii community in Itumbe Station, Kenya?
4. What challenges do levirate practice face in Itumbe Station, Kenya?

#### **1.6 Justification of the Study**

The thesis investigated the implications of the church teachings on levirate marriage among the traditional Abagusii and Christian community. It highlighted the plight of the

widows in the SDA church and established the importance of the levirate custom in Abagusii Christian community. The study did belittle the SDA church stance and teachings on marriage and levirate practice but rather looked at the positive aspects of the traditional Abagusii levirate custom, which should be separated from the undesirable ones. It looked at the importance of listening to the widows in the SDA church in relation to the levirate custom practiced by the same members of the church. The SDA church while adopting the white missionary attitude at the expense of their own indigenous socio-cultural systems tends to condemn this practice with the goal to embrace transnational 'Christian' culture (Peel 2000). Levirate marriage union is considered by the SDA church immoral and therefore not conforming with Christian marriage teachings perpetuated by the same church. Living in a levirate relationship disqualifies a widow from being a full church member and prevents her from participating in church fellowship. This is done with a misconception that traditional cultures and practices of the local people do not carry with them gospel values. However, even though levirate marriage practice is condemned by the church despite having its positive aspects, it continues to be practiced under various customary law systems among the same Christians (Bamgbose, 2002).

In the areas of socio-cultural, religious and economic aspects, the study endeavored to bring out the positive aspects of levirate custom in modern Abagusii society. This is because, after the death of the husband, widows experience all sorts of dehumanizing situations, which require that the maintenance of the widow and her children becomes the responsibility of the family she is married to. When a woman is married, she permanently joins her husband's family, which therefore means that the marriage is not terminated by his death. Rather, the marriage continues with one of the husband's younger brothers or cousins through the practice of levirate union. The partner acts as a substitute levirate

husband with all property belonging to deceased husband being submitted to his family (Sossou, 2002). However, with the condemnation of levirate marriage by the church, widows' welfare tends to decline, which in itself challenges the church to provide widows with some form of social and affective protection. It is not proper for the church to rubbish the practice of levirate unions without giving structures that fill the function played by the same practice. Thus, study aimed to investigate the values of levirate marriage practice that are being eroded by the church for the purpose of giving widows their dignity in the church.

The majority of scholars have also contributed extensively towards the erosion of levirate marriage to the height that no scholarly work explains the positive aspects of levirate marriage unions, in relation to the care of widows and their empowerment within and outside of the SDA church. For instance, Nyarwath (2012), Ngore (2013), Greene (2009). The study challenged the church scholars to modify the perceived negative aspects of levirate custom and encouraged those that are of significance instead of out-rightly condemning the entire practice. Researchers and the Church tend to focus only on the problems facing the orphaned children and neglect the plight of widows, even the data on the widows is difficult to find (Robinson-Whelen, et al., 2001). The difficult reality of widows justifies this study to investigate the centrality of levirate unions to fill the gap created by the loss of the husband.

There is also a misconception around levirate marriages. Levirate marriage is erroneously referred to as widow or bride inheritance, and that those who engage in it do so solely to inherit the dead brother's property, the widow being considered as a property of the dead man. This study aimed to clarify this misconception and argue that levirate marriage does not target the appropriation of property of the dead man, rather aims at providing

continuity, security and protection among other needs of the widow and her children (Kayongo – Male, 1991). Therefore, levirate marriage plays functional role: propagation of life, continuity, moral, social material and guardian functions (Ngore, 2014). The failure to address the misunderstandings around this practice would mean that the affected widows will continue to be unnecessarily condemned by the SDA church without any intent to resolve their predicaments. Equally the SDA church continues to lose believers since they will be forced to join other churches that would understand their situation.

### **1.7 Significance of the Study**

The study findings were hoped to assist various groups of stakeholders: First the study could benefit the church leadership to revise its pastoral plan for the widows. The care of widows is stressed in the Holy Scriptures and yet it seems difficult to form structures that respond to the situation of widows. This implies that the Church is challenged to examine her pastoral plan for the widows that ensure a holistic and sustainable plan of action for these groups of members in society. Together with the church leadership, the Christian community also could benefit since it is sensitized on the reality of widows; they will have a positive regard to widowhood (Manyedi, et al. 2003). This enables them to come up with faith-based support systems for the widows that show the appreciation of this vulnerable group of people and have a positive regard of their own customary marriage practices.

Second, the study could benefit the Christian scholars and theologians interested to understand the levirate marriage custom as a cultural practice and the growing reality of widowhood. Scholars that are keen on understanding the nexus between the two variables: Church teachings and levirate unions practiced by traditional societies. It was emphasized

that researchers seem to focus more on the negative aspects of levirate unions and neglect the actual reality of the widows (Robinson-Whelen, et al., 2001); further, the dismissal of levirate practice has caused a clash between culture of the people and the Christian message. The study gave information on this gap because theologians and scholars lack an ingrained theology of levirate marriages that relates to widows' lives. Additionally, the study's potential research gaps could be of interest to other academics and serve as the foundation for additional study on topics connected to culture and Christian marriage. In order to close the knowledge gap, the study intended to suggest areas for additional research.

Lastly, the study provided essential content to other stakeholders like the government, the general public, church organizations, NGOs and international agencies, policy-makers in their pursuit to find sustainable and holistic ways and strategies to manage the situation of widows in South Kenya Conference and other regions. Thus, forming the basis upon which to develop mechanisms and recommendations by stakeholders that would be effective in resolving the worrying reality of widows in society.

### **1.8 Scope of the Study**

The study area was restricted to the Abagusii community of, Itumbe Station, Kenya the choice of the church districts was informed by the rooted culture of levirate union practice and also being the area where the white missionaries first arrived, and also because of their easy accessibility to the researcher.

The study likewise limited itself to the Christian Church, particularly to the SDA church in relation to its implications on levirate unions among the Abagusii community. It did not intend to study levirate unions from the merely sociological perspective, rather

specific on the church-faith perspective. To achieve this and guided by the objectives, the study critically looked at the indicators of both independent variable (church teachings) and dependent variables (levirate unions). It critically addressed the two variables, examining thematic issues raised by the objectives of the study: Church's teaching on levirate unions for the widows' well-being; Church support systems/programs for widows; relevance of levirate union among the Abagusii community; and challenges levirate unions in the SDA Church in Itumbe Station, South Kenya.

### **1.9 Limitations of the Study**

Entirely, studies have shortcomings, conditions that influence its outcomes, particularly in the process of collecting, analyzing, presenting and even the interpretation of data. No study is totally flawless. Even though they may be negative, they form an integral part of research and always en-focus it. In the context of this study, challenges made the researcher to 'look outside the box' in the endeavor to achieve the objective of the critical issue of levirate unions in the SDA church and not to have a myopic consideration of this critical issue that affects the majority of church members. Some of the predictable limitations of this study included:

Sensitivity surrounding widowhood, which is a very sensitive and emotional issue, some informants did not want to recount their sad story of life. To maneuver this reality for the realization of the study objectives, trained research assistants were used to handle the respondents with best approaches, customer care and due caution. Informants in the selected churches have negative experiences of widowhood with their immediate relatives, families, friends and the Christian community. To create confidence and overcome data

collection challenges, the research teams sought guidelines from the authority of the church.

Negative and scanty literature on levirate unions, particularly SDA Church literature on the study subject: Studies have been done in the general area of widows and widowhood but less on the levirate unions. Those that relate to levirate unions tend to be negative and biased undermining the positive aspects this practice. Theologians from the feminist and liberation schools of thought base their critique of levirate unions as being contrary to widows' freedom, their human rights, and the equality of men and women. They consider it as a form of forced marriage. This implies that the study encountered the problem of inadequate and honest primary literature to address its concerns. However, this limitation was mitigated by intense empirical research on the study subject and appropriating other sources that are related to it.

The misconceptions and biasness on levirate unions: The SDA church categorically considers levirate unions as contrary to Christian faith and teachings; it sees it as leading to polygamy and exploitation of widows, and as being contrary to Biblical teachings on marriage. Because of these misconceptions, informants were unwilling to disclose some of the sensitive information for fear of being stigmatized more. However, this limitation was carefully managed by clarifying and assuring participants of the purpose of the study, which is purely academic and not for any other purpose.

A further limitation arose from lack of enough data and proper Biblical interpretation of levirate unions. This came as a result of misunderstanding the nature of the questionnaire, which was likely to lead the respondents to reword the questions to better fit the answers they sought. However, the issue of insufficient data from the informants was fixed by



once again requiring the informants to provide enough responses to the questionnaire. And for the limitation of misunderstanding the questionnaire, through research assistants, questions were re-phrased to make respondents understand them much better.

It was important to note that these limitations did not connote that this study was not meeting the standards of objectivity and scientific judgment rather they helped it to have a free, undetermined and open approach which adequately addresses the critical problem of the implications of the church's teachings on levirate unions, with special reference to the SDA church.

### **1.10 Assumptions of the Study**

The study operated under the following assumptions: that the widows and widowers, the pastors and members of the church were objective and gave valuable information that enriched the study on this current and persistent practice of levirate unions in Itumbe Station, Kenya.

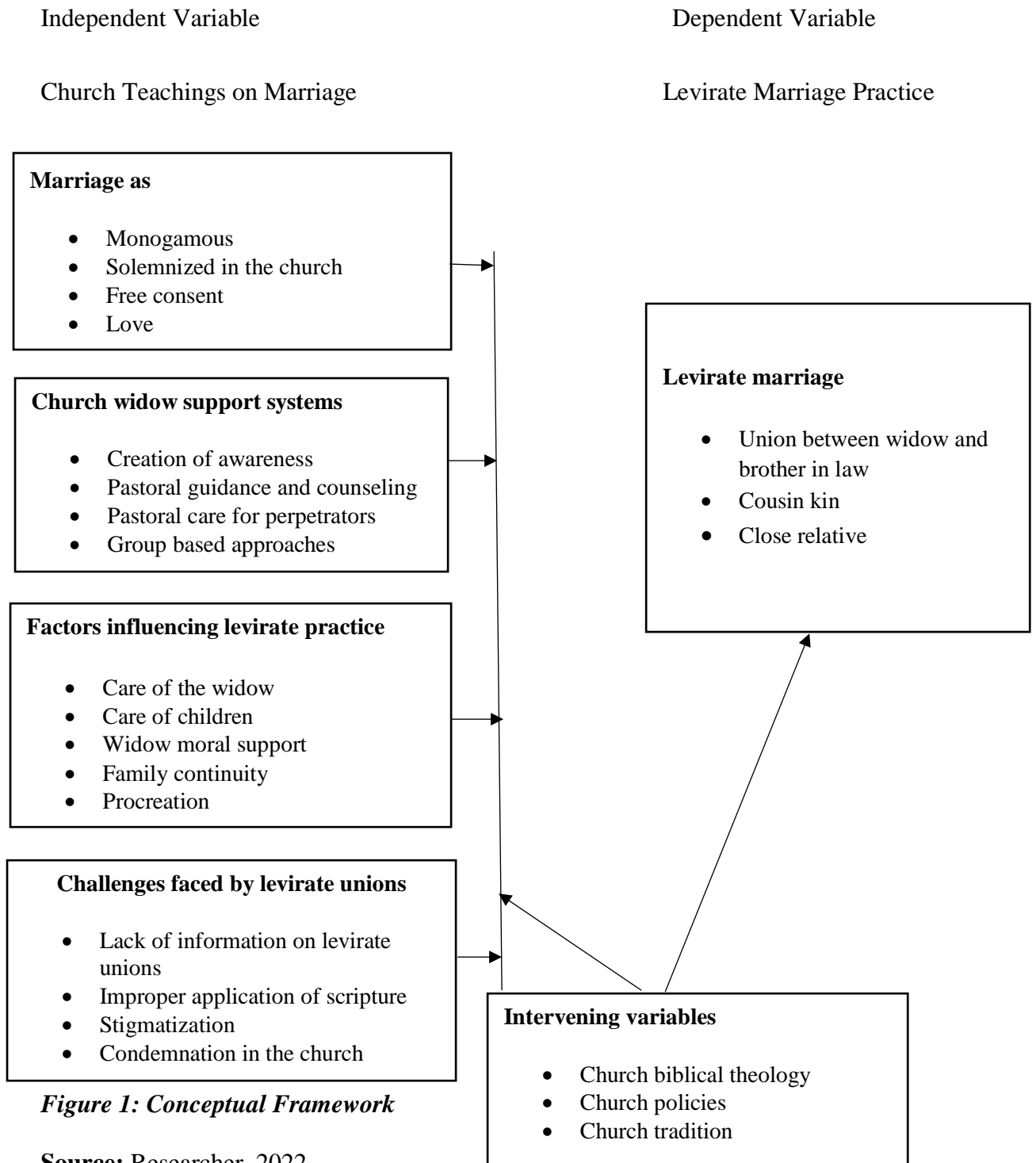
Second, the study assumed that the intervention measures that were reached in this study were to be employed in the SDA church as a basic instrument in ministering to widows, widowers and Abagusii families engaged in levirate union practice.

Third, the study assumed that the results of the study contributed towards the appreciation of the Abagusii marriage practices, particularly the understanding of levirate marriage practice in the Abagusii community. And also encouraged the SDA church to embrace inculturation of the faith in the Abagusii community. Finally, the findings of this study were also assumed to motivate church members to engage in SDA church marriage and

support systems such as workshops and seminars that help in providing necessary information about cultural marriage practices.

### 1.11 The Conceptual Framework

The study made a recap of all variables, capturing the independent and dependent variables each with its indicators that ground various claims made as presented in figure 1.



**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework**

**Source:** Researcher, 2022

In the conceptual framework (Figure 1), the Church's teachings formed the independent variable, with the Christian concept of marriage, church widow support systems, and challenges faced by levirate unions being the basic indicators of independent variable. While levirate practice is the dependent variable, with material, moral, emotional guardianship, et cetera as key indicators of the dependent variable. The intervening variables were conceptualized to be the church policies, church tradition and Biblical theology.

## 1.12 Operational Definition of Key Terms

**Arranged Marriage:** is a formal union arranged by the families of both parties, but there is still consent and the partners retain the option to accept or reject the union.

**Church-Based Initiatives:** These are the activities carried out by the church community which encourage the insertion of those stigmatized into the church.

**Church Support Systems or Programs:** Are services or programs that facilitate the church plan to support widows.

**Exploitation of Widows:** Refers to the element of taking advantage of the condition of the widows, which sometimes may be supported by culture and other elements that cannot be proven.

**Forced Marriage:** Is a marriage without one or both partners' free and informed consent, a marriage cannot be consummated. In such a marriage, there is always lack of love from either one of the partners or even from both partners.

**Inheritance:** This refers to assuming ownership of the property as an heir following the passing of the rightful owner or the succession of a trait.

**Levirate Practice:** Is a cultural union between a widow and a brother of her deceased husband. It is usually platform for the care of the widows and children of the late husband. It is not wife inheritance for the purposes of keeping lineage of the dead husband.

**Sororate Practice:** A cultural union between widower and sister or cousin of his deceased wife.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.0 Introduction**

The chapter presented the review of literature related with the church teachings and their implications on levirate union practice. The review of the literature was guided by the study objectives, and enucleated by the theories that informed the study: Structural Functional Theory (SFT) and Family Systems Theory (FST). In the entire review, the study focused more on the possible gaps that emanated in the literature review. The chapter ended with the conceptual framework that summarized the variables captured in the review of literature.

#### **2.1 The Concept of Levirate Marriage**

The name “levirate” derives from the Latin word “levir,” which meaning the husband’s brother. A man is obligated to wed his deceased brother's widow if the brother passed away without leaving a male heir, according to Robinson (2012). In line with this, the study argued that levirate unions in Africa, particularly the Abagusii community are arrangements for the care of widows and never a new marriage; they are a continuation of the original covenant with the deceased husband. According to the deceased's family's approval, the brother-in-law assumes the role of the departed husband, giving the children born in such an arrangement their identity. These children never belonged to him; instead, they were the deceased's; they carried on the deceased’s lineage rather than that of their biological father; and they live on and inherit the deceased’s possessions. In the Jewish tradition, where the Christian message is derived, widows were people who deserved

special attention; they were always recognized woman whose husband has died and therefore someone helpless in society (Wigoder, 2002). But as regards to her attempts to contract a new levirate union with the same family, there are many misconceptions around it, where they have been taken to mean widow or bride inheritance. But in many communities practicing levirate unions the notion of inheritance is never accommodated on the basis that the word inheritance means to take over the property as an heir after the death of the legitimate cultural owner or succession of a trait.

In African communities, the widow is the one who advises that her kinsman or in-law look after her. Any children born are the late husband's, never the brother or cousin who is the caretaker. Additionally, the widow continues to be a widow even after moving in with the replacement for her deceased spouse. Additionally, she has the freedom to fire the new guardian whenever she wants, especially if she doesn't get along with him. On this premise, it is incorrect to refer to levirate union as true inheritance. (Ogolla, 2014).

The guardian is the person in charge of these duties. Widow custody, widow care, or management of a deceased brother's home are terms that can accurately represent the true concept of levirate union. According to Jewish custom, the widow and her children were given shelter and solace by the levirate union. Even in many African communities and understanding, the widow is never a commodity to be inherited. If a person inherits something, it becomes his or hers and therefore he/she keeps it. Furthermore, in Africa, death does not end a marriage contracted under a customary law. Until she passes away, the widowed woman will still be the deceased's wife. Legally speaking, the widow continues to be the home's owner and a descendant of her late husband (Ogolla, 2014). As a result, it can be inferred that the practice of levirate marriage likewise confers permanency and durability on the marriage after the husband's passing. The family is

stable and resilient because of the widow's prolonged and ongoing presence at her late husband's home. This is strengthened when she has a guardian that shares with her any problems and worries that she might face. Levirate union is not considered to be in and of itself a marriage *per se*, rather described it rather as a continuation of a marriage that had already started; the widow is not counted among his spouses since she belongs to her deceased husband. The new levirate partner only takes care of her and children for his late brother or cousin. Kirwen (1974) described leviratic union as a marital adjustment in a continuing marriage in which a brother -in-law substitutes temporarily for a deceased legal husband.

## **2.2 The Church's teaching on Levirate Marriage**

The teachings of the Church on levirate unions and widowed is based upon the Holy Scriptures. Both the Old and New Testaments have elaborate theology on marriage that informs the Christian church teachings. In both Testaments, marriage is a permanent union between one-man and one-woman coming together to form one flesh bound by mutual consent (Mt. 19:1-12; Mk. 10:1-12) and solemnized by the church minister. On levirate unions, the church has an elaborate theology in the OT. A classical theologian Porter (Porter 1965) explained that levirate union as the best example of the principle of corporate personality enshrines in the OT, whereby the family, clan and tribe are treated as a unit rather than individuals, hence the obligation of a brother in the family to take over the widow of the deceased brother. In the OT tradition, this kind of union was considered a device by God to ensure proper caring for the widow. On this, the OT law says that the woman may not belong to a 'stranger', meaning a person outside the family, but to the family of the late husband. Affirming the teachings of the Scriptures, Thurston (1989) asserted that any wrong done to the unprotected widow and the orphan would



attract the vengeance of God. Following the position of the Holy Scriptures, the brother of the deceased is not under any compulsion to agree to this kind of marital arrangement; he has the option of refusing the arrangement for reason(s) best known to him. Under such determination, it is expected that the widow makes it known to the elders, and she is expected to remove the sandal of her deceased husband's brother and spit into his face in public and before the elders of the land (Dt 25:9; cf. Rt4:1–12). In the OT traditional arrangements among the people of Israel, levirate unions were also to ensure that the lineage of the deceased man who dies without being able to produce an heir would not die out; it was regarded as a great misfortune for a man to die without a male heir such that the levir was expected to consummate the union (Mbiti, 2002).

In the NT, the issue of levirate marriage was a thorny. This is expressively manifested in Lk. 20:28-31. Jesus was asked:

Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and have children for his brother. Now there were seven brothers. The first one marries a woman and died childless. The second and then the third married her, and in the same way the seven died, leaving no children. Finally, the woman died too. Now then, at the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?

Jesus did not condemn it but gave a philosophical response locating marriage as a human earthly enterprise. This response does not require a quick reaction to condemn the practice of levirate marriage unions without a proper theological basis. Muga (1975) noted that the arrival of the missionaries offered a novel and foreign monogamous type of marriage

to the African church members in his book on African Response to Western Christian Religion. This meant that both polygamous and levirate marriage practices were equally discouraged and therefore, contributing to the disintegration of the African traditional patterns of marriage. However, the profound implications of this is that it could not recognize and tolerate widow guardianship on the presupposition that this would advance the widow and the heir to indulge in illicit sexual relationships considered to be against the principles of Christian marriage and living (Shorter, 1975). On this, in line with 1Timothy 5:9-14, the Church teaches that upon the death of a husband, a widow is to either remarry and to be supported and kept occupied by the new marriage partner or live alone without a marriage partner.

In line with the Church position on marriage and widowhood, (Nkhwashu, 2012) and Baloyi (2001), argued that love should be the driving force behind marital choices. For them, the parents or family in deciding for the widow to remarry within the family is no substitute for love. Baloyi (Baloyi, 2012) further advanced the religious argument that levirate unions promote polygamy in the sense that if all the brothers of the dead man were already married at the time of his death, the one who was to inherit the widow would not be expected to divorce his legal wife, but to marry the widow as another wife.

The gaps in the literature is that the church teachings on levirate marriage unions systematically present the endeavor to instill the gospel message, but it does not take into account the people's aspirations, needs, thought forms and cultural mentality and reality. The literature avoids the fact while the church may strive to shape culture, she should equally be ready to be shaped by culture. The Church position on levirate union is not in tandem with the Jewish practices envisaged in the OT tradition that is the basis for the

NT. It will be pretentious for the Church to strive to construct her true identity in isolation and free from all cultural determinants of the faithful who receive the Christian message. Sankey (1994) argued that Christian faith must relate to the pattern of life of each culture, institutions, and forms of inter-personal relations and values that inform its contextual philosophy. This points towards the need for inculturated faith and theologies that give insight to inculturation of levirate unions as an obligation to the church.

### **2.3 Church Support Systems for Widows**

It goes beyond doubt that there is increasing number of widowed people and orphaned families; with the global dwindling economy and scarce resources, the affected widows are not able to attend to their basic needs such as proper healthcare, shelter, nutrition, psychological support, the education of their children, and so forth; they are totally left without spousal and sometimes parental love, care and social protection, which deny them all possible chances to access basic needs. Fleet (2012) argued that even though friends and family may surround the widow, most widows are left alone after the death of their spouse and this is why they need support systems that help them to deal with the sad situations life imposes on them. The support systems encourage the widows to accept their situation in faith (Mombo, et al., 2011). The Church incorrectly and unjustifiably bases its teachings on 1 Timothy 5:3–8, in which Paul describes three separate widows. First, widows in need who have no family to provide them with material support. Second, those who have family members who can provide for them financially (1 Timothy 5:4), and third, self-indulgent widows (1 Timothy 5:6-7). Only the first type, according to Paul, are true widows who require the financial support of the Ephesian Christian community.

These Pauline exaltations are minimalistic and advance blatant discrimination of widows; they do not take into account what Bennett and Soulsby (2012) raised, the idea that the loss of a spouse affects almost all aspects and spheres of the life of the widowed spouse, including the affect areas, and it has serious consequences on her psycho-social well-being and also their economic sphere of life. Eboiyehi and Akinyeni (2016) specified myriad of challenges that come with the loss of the husband, where the widow is faced with discriminatory realities of isolation, and poor access to basic services like healthcare, material needs, psychosocial trauma, and abandonment to loneliness even in the Church. Widows do not only need material provisions for there are other needs that are unquantifiable that the Church may not be capable of providing. Also the children under the care of the widowed are not insulated from the basic needs that were provided by their deceased father. This reality raises the need for church support systems that directly benefit widows and children left to them by their dead Husbands. Church widow support systems are meant to comfort, support and encourage widows so that they find understanding of their condition in the Christian community and faith.

Equivalent to the early church, the modern church cannot passively watch the plight of the vulnerable members of society and cling on teachings that sometimes are uncontextualised. For instance, the early Christians in the Acts of the Apostles passionately took their obligation to support the vulnerable members of the Christian community, including the widows (Acts 6:1–7). This zealous mission of caring for the widows led into first controversies that faced the infant Church as the Hebrew widows received a greater part of the daily distribution than the Hellenist widows, which today is replicated in the Church as to how and who should care for this vulnerable group of people and who are these widows. Thurston (1989) explained that the early Church did not deny

material assistance to needy widows and orphans regardless of the class they belong. The study, however, looked only on the material provisions that the widows received, thus giving a gap of other aspects of the widows' needs. Relying only on the material aspects of widows gives a possible regard of widows as a liability. However, Kavenly (2006) reiterated that the early Church did not restrict its involvement with the widows to only providing material support or allowing them to be merely passive members in the community. Instead, the Church recognized the contribution that the widows could make to the welfare and spiritual growth of the church believers through an Order of Widows. In his holistic regard, Kavenly argued that widows are resourceful members, who through the order of widows involved themselves in the pastoral ministry of the Church like house visitations, where they consoled and prayed with the sick members of the Christian community who feel desolate, giving them hope of life based on their own experiences as widows; widows also gave practical teachings to younger women on how to support their families in times of suffering. By involving widows in the life the Christian church, they are made useful members of society and it gives them hope that not all is lost to death of their husbands.

Neglecting widows in the evangelical ministry of the church creates a void in the pastoral planning of the church. Gerkin (1997) asserted that the Christian community is understood by the nature of its evangelical activities that it does to members of society. With the help and support of the community and the family, the widows can be healed emotionally, physically and spiritually (Neufeld, 2008). This is reiterated by Rebekah Evans (2018), when she affirmed that churches are charged with being a practical and spiritual help to the community and to their members regardless of the actual condition. Encyclopaedia Britannica (2018), holds that the Christian community through support

systems like counselling, charity, women groups, etc., executes its care for the needy widows, and orphans. Usha (2011) postulated that in Holland almost every Christian community has structures which are supported through the offerings of the members and that there are church communities which help members that experience conjugal bereavement due to the death of one spouse. However, the same study points out that even in the church widows that are under the care of the Christian communities are sometimes subjected into various kinds of sufferings and mistreatment. This sentiment was raised by Peterman (2012) who underscored that widows face discrimination in asset inheritance, leading to poverty for themselves and their children. Peterman does not indicate the kind of mistreatment or discrimination that widows go through, neither does he give clear measures to resolve the implied hardships widows go through. Human Right Watch (2010) noted that many widows in Kenya have severe financial challenges following the loss of the husband, particularly when he was the only source of income. Due to this, the bereaved partner is forced to live alone in a strange and isolating state of widowhood, necessitating the need for social support networks.

In a specific way, a study by Kayode (2011) postulated that the use of professional counselling invigorates widows to open up and express themselves emotionally, reaffirming the support of the coping mechanisms to enhance self-esteem and autonomy to restore quality of life. In Kayode's claims, counselling enables widows to recount their own story from their experience. However, he challenged Christian churches to be fully involved through the strengthening of pastoral care ministry and possibly through the creation of a ministry of widowhood, where professional counselling can be realized. In the same way Amaru (2012) identified counselling needs of widows to include economic, psychological, socio-cultural and educational. Amaru opened up and looked up beyond

the material needs of widows. But the study concluded that the church needs to have reliable economic and human resources to support counsellors and psychologists in their service to the widows; effective counselling for widows need strong ecclesial support systems.

In the Acts of the Apostles (9:39), Paul encourages the Christian church women with widows in their households to follow the example of Dorcas (one who provided for the widows in Joppa) and urged the entire Christian community of Ephesus to continue practicing a holistic care approach to widows by honouring and assisting them. Inspired by this, Dunn (1994) argued that the vulnerability of widows calls for the church to institute particular support systems that are beyond material provisions to guarantee that widows are decently cared for; systems that are aimed to increase widows' social engagements and activities that assist them to overcome the psychological distress related to the loss of their marriage partners. This is recapped by Collins (2002) who urges the Christian community to stand and support widows. For young widows with children with the deceased husband, the church has the evangelical obligation to assist them to responsibly take care of the children under their custody. The same is reiterated by Asuamah (2012) and Waruta and Kinoti (2002) who asserted that it is the responsibility of the church to offer professional pastoral counseling to widows and exalt the Church to empower the widows to become women capable of keeping their own families. The notified gap in this literature is that it does not give an elaborate type of Church support systems like home bound programs and link teams that help widows cope with challenges of their reality; they are mere spiritual exaltations that do not go deep to enlist what the Church does or should actually do to help the widows.

Although there are other studies by Muthoni (2007), Jackson (2002) and Onyanha and Shorter (1998) that discussed about Church programs and orphanages for orphaned children and encourage that the Church instead should have home-bound programs and home-bound link teams. But the unfortunate thing is that they do not talk anything about widows under that are charged with the responsibility of care of the children left to them by their late husbands. This is an indication that there are no such Church programs and homes for the widows. The studies undermined the care of the person of the widow affected by the loss of the spouse and now expected to solely face all the responsibilities for the care of children. These studies emphasize on the church programs for the care of orphaned children, but they do not take into account a situation of a widowed parent that should also be supported so that she decently takes care of her orphaned children; they are silent about the situation of the widows and the support they need to properly bring up the children. This situation is stressed by Chauke (2003) who observing that churches in Zimbabwe take a detached stance in the care of widows who are supposed to take care of the children under their responsibility. Bellamy (2005) also asserted that the silence and inaction from the Christian community that surrounds widowhood for proper care of themselves and their children is morally reprehensible and unacceptable. When widows are not taken care of by the church and other institutions, then the question is: Who does the Church expect to take care of them? This gives the rationale for the other cultural systems like levirate unions to take up that responsibility.

Self-help initiatives is another important support system that plays a fundamental role in helping widows cope and overcome the challenges that come with the loss of their spouses. On this, Beach, et al (2000) informed that widows need to change from seeing themselves married to thinking of themselves as widowed, learn to make decisions



independently, learn to be alone and make friends and join associations that enable them to be out with people. Vitelli (2015) recommended that for the widows to get over the hardships of grief and loneliness, they need to seek for their own social support systems that sometimes may point towards levirate marriage unions. This is supported by the Bible, particularly the account of Abigail, who, following the death of her husband Nabal, made the decision to follow David and later married him (1 Samuel 25:42). Even though what David did displeased God, Bathsheba, Uriah's widow, also became David's wife after seven days of mourning (2 Samuel 11:27). The Christian community should encourage young widows who choose to remarry to do so. But it should be noted that remarriage should not be considered from a myopic perspective of material support to the widow, rather it should be looked from a wider perspective of a holistic consideration of the widow's life.

As explained by Fazoranti and Aruma (2007) widowhood is a complicated situation, widows feel lonely, lose friends and they tend to withdraw from the community. Mwangi (2014) explained that social support provided by friends, families, churches, NGOs and the communities help widows in coping better with grief and the related challenges. Widow initiatives also include widow to widow programs that are geared toward empowering widows to reach out to their fellows to comfort and encourage one another. Self-help support systems enable them to cope with their own reality of widowhood, offering them solidarity, comfort and consolation. Such self-help programs give direct advice, encouragement, ideas, support and emphasize the need for the widows to act for themselves in times when they need direction; they give them a greater sense of independence and self-worth. The study by Kaori (2007) explained that widows benefit from social support groups since they enable to socially active and resilient after the death

of their spouses; they need to be socially engaged through group networks and activities. Kane (2017) argued that such social groups enable widows to grow by accepting their current situation, encourage them to take part in social events including luncheons, social gatherings, neighbourhood networks, village or estate merry-go-rounds, and investing groups.

#### **2.4 Factors influencing Levirate Unions**

Earlier, it was explained that when white Christian missionaries came to Africa, they insisted that monogamy is the absolute Christian way and that marriage ends on the death of the husband or wife. But this opened up a cluster of hard questions that informs this study. Should a Christian widow, faced with levirate marriage seek a Christian monogamous marriage, even if that entails divorce from her husband's family and leaving behind her children? Does the Church have tangible widow support programs? In the absence of those programs, what should the widow do? What relationship does a Christian widow have with her deceased husband's family? Of what importance is levirate marriage to societies practicing it? These questions inform the reasons as to why most Christianized communities continue to practice levirate marriages. Ngore (2012) maintained that the persistence of levirate marriage in many Christian faithful despite being condemned by the Church and other entities implies that there are critical values attached to it that should be researched, particularly family arrangements as informed by the FST that enucleates this study.

The practice of levirate marriage unions is grounded on the fact that many widows face serious hardships after the death of their husbands lowers or affects her dignity: loss of

material base, friends, family, peace of mind, and other securities; their support systems shrink considerably after the death of their husbands, exposing them to other social vices like prostitution and undignified jobs in their attempt to respond to unmet needs which equally affect them and their children. Weisberg (2011) observed that the levirate practice is taken to fill these gaps taking into account that it is not imposed on the widow but rather she has the freedom to decide whom to stay with among the brothers and cousins of the deceased husband. She customarily enters Levirate union with the guarantee that her dignity is respected.

### ***The Continuity of Family Bonds***

The levirate practice among communities practicing it is geared towards ensuring continuity of family bonds, and the lineage of the deceased man. Owino (2000.) informed that levirate union is an important way of continuing close family ties even after the death of the husband. This is realized in various aspects: First the union maintains family identity and stability in a traditional structural organization and setup. While Maillu (1988) asserted that levirate union enables the widow and children to continue staying at the deceased's cultural legal home known to her and the children left to her. Shorter (1975) had argued that levirate practice is intended to keep in touch the two families (the family of the woman and her husband), which gives children a sense of blood belonging to their father and his relatives. The widow and the children can authoritatively stay on in their homestead; the children live with their mother and their uncles and the levir.

The family cannot afford to lose its children, and therefore use levirate union as a means available to retain the widow in the family, and prevent her from taking her children back

to her parents' home or to someone else where they do not belong. Kirwen (1979) argued that through levirate arrangement, the widow cannot divorce herself from the deceased husband's family and remarry outside of the family. She is to maintain her role and authority as a legal wife within the family of her deceased husband, while the levir makes it possible for the children and their mother to continue living in their true home, saving them the trouble of seeking a new family in a different family arrangement. The widow continues in the lineage of the dead husband as a functioning wife. Thus, the widow's relationship with the lineage family she is married to does not end with the death of her husband; the death of the husband does not mean the dissolution of marriage relationships that already exist between two families (of the husband and of the wife).

Another aspect of continuity of the family bonds or lineage is that of propagation of life by giving birth to children for the deceased man. This is the most contested aspect of levirate practice. However, the practice is aimed at optimizing the widow's fertility potential and reproductive mission, particularly the young widows are encouraged to have levirate unions to go on having children in the name of the deceased husband. Mbiti (1981), Wanjiku et al. (1997) and Mae (1999) all agreed that the levirate customary system serves to raise children, particularly in cases where a man dies without having children. The gap in this literature is that it regards the levir as a sexual and a reproductive tool who only does his work for the dead brother. The literature undermines value and dignity of the levir.

### ***Guardianship for the Widow and Children***

In many African communities, the husband has the responsibility of taking care in terms of protection, provision of material needs and control of the family. Owino (2000) in his

study on wife inheritance among the Luo community, explained that the man is to ensure that resources are decently used to benefit his entire family. Ngore (2012) and Wanjiku (1997) explained that when such a man dies and leaves his family behind, particularly where poverty is prevalent, the levir (brother-in-law) who is in a position to support both the widow and her children takes up the responsibility of care of his late brother's family; the levir provides basic services and protects the widow and her children from any forms of threats. Because of this guardianship role, Lutta (2015) argued that levirate marriage practice among the Luo community is made imperative for the Luo people. Mbiti (2002) observed that the practice is of great psycho-social value to the widow experiencing a sense of insecurity caused by the death of the husband. The levir is considered the widow's guardian exercising the duties of protecting and support her with her children. Tuju (1996) restated that the levir is to give security and guidance and not merely sexual intimacy benefits to the widow; he is not to waste the wealth left behind by the deceased brother, which according to Tuju is the reality with professional inheritors today. Levirate arrangement is meant to take care of the widow and her children in the same way the deceased husband would do and not let the family of the deceased disintegrate. Thus, the value of protecting the widow and her children is cherished by both the Church and traditional communities through levirate union since in the traditional African context children need to belong to a particular family. But the Church does not give cogent measures as stipulated in the levirate practice.

### ***Moral Care of the Widow***

The practice of levirate unions entails the moral care of the widow, which goes beyond procreation for the deceased. Platteau, et al (2012) argued that in situations of prostitution and divorce levirate marriage constitutes a better option; unmarried widow because of her

widowhood conditions may easily fall prey to prostitution and other indiscriminate sexual relations with other men. To cure this, the union ensures sexual integrity and satisfaction to the widow, particularly the younger ones. According to Ngore (2012), the levirate union practice helps to preserve the moral integrity of the widow by minimizing sexual immorality in the traditional Luo culture. Sexually active widows are expected to have a communally recognized sexual partner (brother in-laws) to meet her essential affective needs. The widow had to be kept from interacting with anyone. The technique confines the widow, lessens her illegitimate movements, and fosters a stable condition of sexual family life, according to Abuya (2002), who also affirmed that it helps to prevent promiscuous behavior.

### ***Community Promotion***

The communal aspect of levirate union is founded on African social philosophy of “I am because you are, since you are, therefore I am” (Mbiti, 2002.). Under this philosophical postulate, the widow continues to exist for the late husband’s social development. Referring to the Luo community, Oruka and Masolo (1983) argued that levirate practice served to foster social connectedness in the community, particularly for the extended families where after the death of their son, they still feel the collective responsibility to care for his family. The family has close emotional and social relationships that contribute to their sense of unity. By placing a duty on the widow to continue providing services to her late husband's social circle, the tradition enhances the kinship bonds among residents of the village.

Therefore, levirate union is not merely for sexual and procreation proclivity, but rather more of the family (both church and traditional family) arrangement that take charge of

the needs of the widow, children, family and the entire community, within the social structure. This is because, the loss of the husband or wife impacts every aspect of a widow's life together with the children left in her care. These values of levirate marriage unions are what the Church undermines under the pretext of the position that the practice is immoral in that it leads to polygamy and other promiscuous behaviors. But is entirely wrong to reduce the values of the practice to sexual intimacy only. As pointed out in the above sub-sections, the church does not have structures that holistically cover the needs and expectations of the widows.

### **2.5 Challenges facing Levir in the Church**

The evangelical activity of care of widows in the Church is determined by God in the Holy Scriptures. In 1 Timothy 5:3-16 widows are depicted as of main concern for the Christian community; at Ephesus, the Christian community had a responsibility to care for them since there were no other people to take up the responsibility. But the care of widows by the church is not without its challenges within the church. For instance, one of the earliest problems that arose in the Apostolic Church was that the widows were being neglected (Acts 6:1-7). This forced the early Church to choose devoted men and women to serve the widows. This problem that confronted the early Church still persists to date in the Church, sometimes leaving the Church without other possible alternatives except to turn to traditional forms of solving their widowhood related problems. A study by Mwangi (2014) established that widows lack necessary support systems, in terms of family, friends and professionals that could help them to cope with the loss of their spouses and the task of solely bringing up children.

The study by Owen (2010) postulated that widows are being excluded in many areas of their lives, including socio-religious aspects. Furthermore, children in the care of widows are exposed to various insecurities that jeopardize their future. After the passing of their partners, widows endure prejudice in asset inheritance, which results in poverty for both the widow and her children, as noted by Dube (2017) and Peterman (2012). Widows can also be abandoned by their families or the Christian community. This is explained in the study by Manyedi et al. (2007), who claimed that widows in Botswana experience social exclusion and are ostracized by the society because of taboos surrounding widowhood. Due to the suspicion that the widows were responsible for their husbands' deaths, the community has abandoned and neglected them.

A study by Clinton (2008) noted that young widows receive inadequate support systems from the church, family and friends leaving them with the task to shoulder all responsibilities of bringing up children under their care on their own. A study by Mc Goldrick and Walsh (2004) explained that young widows' parents become overprotective of them after their partners died, creating more stress for them. Bradley (2007) and Feinberg (2009) explained that widows are left with the feeling of abandonment. This is in disagreement with the study by Mgboo (2014) on the role of the Anglican church on widowhood practice in Ezeagu, Nigeria, which found out that the Anglican Church is active in addressing detrimental and degrading widowhood practices like levirate union and other behaviors related sexual intimate life by charting ways to assist widows in ordering their personal worlds through pastoral and caring activities.

Miruka et al (2015) argued that widows are not fully cared for in Christian churches; they are made to feel neglected and suffer within the church and in the larger society; they suffer from lack self-esteem and loneliness since they do not have groups to identify



themselves with. These sentiments are echoed by Carr and Utz (2002) contended that the majority of widows never receive help during the period of grief and even after. They point out that after the funeral, family members, friends, funeral committees and even the Christian community go their own ways and never turn back to give the widow the support she needs; the widow is left alone in totally new life circumstances for which she has little or no preparation to enable her cope with the new reality of widowhood. She is left to live a lonely life, isolated, depressed, with virtually no support systems from the church and the general society.

## **2.6 Theoretical Framework**

This study was informed by two theories: Structural Functional Theory and Family Systems Theory. Structural Functional Theory was used to explain the dependent variable - levirate variable, while the Family Systems Theory addressed the independent variable - the Church's teachings. Both theories also complement each other since, the limitation of one is covered by the other.

### **2.6.1 Structural Functional Theory (SFT)**

Structural Functional Theory (SFT), also referred to as Functional Theory (FT) was developed by Durkheim (1858-1917) to explain social institutions as a shared way for individuals in society to meet their own biological needs. The theory regards social structures, customs, traditions, social institutions and their interrelated parts as social arrangements or facts. Social facts are the laws, morals, values, religious beliefs, customs, rituals, and all of the cultural rules that govern social life of the people (Durkheim 1895). These facts are like parts that hold society together in a balance and equilibrium (Durk,

2007). Thus, according to SFT human life is guided by relatively stable social structures like culture, religion, family setup, et cetera.

In the context of this study, the SFT is relevant since it acknowledges the functional values attached to traditional levirate custom, and it advocates for realization of those values entailed in the practice levirate unions. As members of society work together to fulfill their societal needs, cultures and cultural practices of different societies exist to meet the basic reality of their members. Cultural practices play a fundamental role for the benefit of individuals. But it is regarded not to serve society, then this creates a problem to those who practice certain traditions. When one part of the system is dysfunctional, it affects all other parts and creates social problems, prompting social change (Vibha Desai, 2013). Levirate unions as a social fact serves one or more functions within those cultural societies that embrace it. Social institutions like the church and traditions of the local people should work together to promote solidarity and stability of members. Levirate unions play a functional role of minimizing sexual immorality amongst widows, care of the widows and their children, support of all kinds of widows, encourages continuity of families affected by the natural attrition of death of the husband, guard the vulnerable widows (Ngore, 2012).

### **2.6.2 Family Systems Theory (FST)**

Family Systems Theory (FST) is entrenched within the Functional Theory canopy that underscores the functional approach of social systems. The FST was propounded by Bowen Murray in 1960s to explain human ways of behavior as determined and modified by the family system. According to the theory, the family is considered one central unit that looks into emotional well-being of its members through family ties and relationships;

in other words, the family functions as a complex, dynamic, and changing collection of members that work to meet the needs of others (Smith, 2016). Further, FST emphasizes the importance of context(s) in imputing meaning to members within the family. FST offers different plans of action to address issues or problems that affect the family; problems that are related to depression, loneliness, relationships, inadequate material support, addiction, and substance abuse, and other issues. This implies that the theory serves as a family support system for those in need either as an intervention or prevention for family members in dire need. As a support system, it allows individuals to discuss their problems openly and establish a clear channel of finding solutions to problems that affect them.

Levirate practice serves as a family support system in the context of this study and has the purpose of resolving issues, particularly those that affect the family of the deceased husband. FST creates a forum where family members can connect and exchange ideas in order to discuss the reality of widowhood and look for solutions that involve the family. Levirate practice offers widows who have been affected a place to speak inside the family structure where she will be heard, respected, and given social, psychological, and emotional assistance. FST underscores the importance of remaining constantly mindful of the reality of widows within the perspective of both religious and traditional values of care for the needy widows. Understanding the importance of interactions between the church and traditions brings forth and fosters ways of working together for viable solutions for the problems confronting widows in the church. The family is a domestic church which should interact with other systems that put forward as priority to the plight of widows. Together the interrelated constructs of FST reveal the vital relevance of

interactional dynamics to holistically understand that solutions to widowhood is not just doctrinal and it is not one sided (Jackson, 2009).

Unimaginable pain results after the loss of a husband, and in some cases, the tragedy is made worse by the widow's close family members who are only concerned with obtaining the deceased's possessions without regard for the challenging circumstances the widow is facing. After their partners pass away, Dube (2017) demonstrated how widows experience social alienation and marginalization. While Vitelli (2015) noted that loneliness can lead the widow into risky practices like prostitution that come with psychological impacts such as depression, grief and other physical diseases. Widows are vulnerable and needy family members that need to be supported. Appropriating the FST, the practice of levirate unions serves as a family therapy to the widow where she can find her place in the larger society context in that she does not feel out of place and go away leaving her children behind to suffer.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.0 Introduction**

The chapter focused on the methodology that was used in conducting the study. It comprised of the following subsections: study area, research design, target population, sample and sampling techniques, methods of data collection, data processing and analysis, reliability and validity of instruments, and ethical considerations. All these aspects were done in the context of the study variables on Church teachings, particularly the SDA church and levirate unions among the Abagusii community who are both church members and at the same time practitioners of customary levirate marriage.

#### **3.1 Research Design**

The study being qualitative by nature implied the description of the practice of levirate marriage among the Abagusii community. The study, therefore, used a descriptive design that enabled to explain and describe indicators of independent variable on the implications of the church teachings on levirate practice among the Abagusii community in Itumbe Station, Kenya. The choice of the descriptive design is informed by the nature of data that was collected which involved a variety of empirical experiences of the informants, their personal and group experiences, opinions, points of view, introspection, life stories, among others (Heppner, et al., 2008) on levirate practice and the church position. The research did not only describe and capture peoples' experiences, but also evaluated church strategies to help widows to response to the reality of the practice of levirate marriage unions among the Abagusii, showing their strengths and weakness. This

managed to unveil the impact the practice has on the integration of widows into the Christian community. The inclusion of the evaluative approach in the study helped to offer possible recommendations that are deemed to open avenues for the church to appreciate the good values embedded in Abagusii levirate union practice that could complement Christian teachings on widowhood. Thus, the descriptive design informed the gathering of adequate and accurate information, analysis and presentation of same data on levirate practice and church values as a step to enable the SDA church embrace inculturation of the practice in Church family pastoral ministry (Orodho, 2008).

### **3.2 Study Area**

The study was conducted in the SDA churches of Itumbe Station, South Kenya. As was indicated in the background of this study, Itumbe Station is composed of 8 districts, with 1551 widows: Amariba with 217 widows, Nyaguta with 325 widows, Boronyi with 172 widows, Nyakunguru with 166 widows, Kegochi with 99 widows, Igare with 189 widows, Nyansongo with 288 widows, and Sameta with 95 widows (South Kenya Conference report, 2020). However, the study centered itself on two churches from each district to have an equal distribution and reality of the widows in Itumbe Station. The churches included Maruanga with 30 widows, Matunwa with 30, Boronyi 23 widows, Irianyi 22 widows, Motonto Sabbath School 32 widows, Nyagancha 30 widows, Itibonge 21 widows, Riamandere Sabbath School 21 widows, Igare Central 32 widows, Egoti 23 widows, Nyaguta 34 widows, Kabwori Central 32 widows, Itumbe Central 23 widows, Birongo II Central 35 widows, Sameta 30 widows, and Riobure 32 widows. The choice of these churches for the study was motivated by the fact that Itumbe Station is more of a rural set up and deeply rooted in levirate union practices with no statistical data and any

other detailed information on the plight of widows either those who remarried and those who opted to have levirate unions. Another reason was that Itumbe Station is one of the areas with deep SDA church tradition has a deep conservative regard to the church on certain traditional practices like levirate marriage unions.

### **3.3 Target Population**

To have a comprehensive data on the reality of the church and levirate union practices in Itumbe Station SDA church, the study targeted to have a diverse representation of participants. It targeted 406 widows from all the 8 districts with the following selected churches: Maruanga with 30 widows, Matunwa with 30, Boronyi 23 widows, Irianyi 22 widows, Motonto Sabbath School 32 widows, Nyagancha 30 widows, Itibonge 21 widows, Riamandere Sabbath School 21 widows, Igare Central 32 widows, Egoti 23 widows, Nyaguta 34 widows, Kabwori Central 32 widows, Itumbe Central 23 widows, Birongo II Central 35 widows, Sameta 30 widows, and Riobure 32 widows, The churches were randomly taken but guided by Mugenda and Mugenda (2003) formula of having a reasonable representation. It also targeted 200 family members, 8 pastors, 80 Abagusii traditional leaders, and 80 family life leaders, giving a target of 774 respondents from the 8 districts that form SDA church, Itumbe Station as shown in table 1 below.

**Table 1: Target Population**

Study Cluster	Target Population	Percentage
Widows	406	52%
Family members	200	28%
Pastors	8	0.9%
Abagusii Traditional Leaders	80	9.1%
Family Life Leaders	80	9.1%
Total	774	100%

**Source:** Field Data, 2023

The units of analysis are the widows themselves. The criteria for the choice of this target population was life experience of those who have either had direct experience with the reality of widowhood or are indirectly working with widows encountering the challenges of life, including levirate union attempts.

### **3.4 Sample and Sampling Techniques**

#### **3.4.1 Sampling Techniques**

In the endeavor to have adequate and appropriate data, multistage sample was used where different sampling techniques required different clusters of the respondents. For the stratum of widows and family members, the study used simple random sampling technique. This sampling technique was found to be suitable because of its wider coverage, representing various clusters of participants covering the concerns of all the objectives of the study. Data from these two clusters of participants was a quantitative nature as it came from the structured questionnaire that was distributed and collected for analysis. While censuses were used for pastors and purposive was used to collect data from



a section of widows, Abagusii traditional leaders and church family life leaders. Both censors and purposive sampling techniques enabled the researcher to rely on his own judgement when choosing the respondents (Black, 2010). All the three sampling techniques (simple random, purposive and censors) enabled objectivity of the information for the study findings. Widows were considered the unit of analysis for the study.

### 3.4.2 Sample Size

The study aimed at having a sample size that is precise, authentic and capable of properly influencing its outcomes. To determine an appropriate sample size, the study used Mugenda and Mugenda (2003), formula, which formula calculates that a sample size of 10% is appropriate for a study target population exceeding 1000 informants; whereas a sample size of 30% is preferable for a target population of less than 1,000 participants. But for a target population of 100 and below respondents, the researcher should employ 100%. Informed by these scientific postulates, the requirement for the sample of 30% was adopted to determine the sample size of the study as shown in table 2 below.

**Table 2: The Sample Size**

Target group	Target Population	Sampling procedure	Sample size	Percentage
Widows	406	Simple Random	122	49%
Family Members	200	Simple Random	60	24%
Pastors	8	Censors	8	3%
Abagusii Leaders	80	Purposive	30	12%
Family Life Leaders	80	Purposive	30	12%
Total	774		250	100%

**Source :**Field Data, 2023

As illustrated in table 2 above, the researcher engaged various clusters of informants with the sole purpose of obtaining a significant and multifaceted representation of the respondents. These was justified by the data collected from church widows, family members, Abagusii traditional leaders and church family life leaders selected to participate in the study from all the districts that constitute Itumbe station of the SDA church, South Kenya Conference. Consequently, the sample size for the entire study was 250informants as illustrated in table 2 above.

### **3.5 Research Instruments**

The study used three data collection instruments: structured questionnaire, in-depth interviews and focused group discussions (FGDs). The choice of these three data collection instruments took into account the capabilities of the informants to give the needed data for the study (Kumar, 2014). Both in-depth interviews and FGDs were considered to account for the various experiences and knowledge of the respondents that brought about complementarities of the data for the objectivity of the study findings. Basically, the three instruments were considered to corroborate each other, thereby fomenting a formidable reliability and validity of the data that will be collected and thereafter analyzed and presented as study findings.

#### **3.5.1 The Structured Questionnaire**

According to Kothari (2010), a structured questionnaire was thought to be the best technique for data collecting because it covered a larger population of informants and was effective, convenient, and quick to complete. Furthermore, because participant anonymity

was regarded as being essential to the entire data collection process, the questionnaire ensured the secrecy of the information source. This was effected by ensuring that the inclusion of their names was not a mandatory requirement. Thus, the study, therefore employ a structured questionnaire with close-ended questions for 62 widows, 60 family members and 30 church family life leaders giving a total of 152 of participants. This was in tandem with the family systems theory chosen to guide the study in the manner of involving those engaged with family structures and organization in the re-looking of the condition of widows in the SDA church. This was because church members who are both SDA church members and adherents of levirate traditional practices find themselves in the dilemma and paradox of either to follow their Abagusii traditional practices on levirate union or strictly adhere to the traditions.

The questionnaire was sub-divided into two primary sections. Section one focused on participants' demographic information, and section two focused on thematic issues contained in the study objectives using Likert scale format of 5 to 1: SA-strongly agree, A-agree, N-neutral, SD-strongly disagree and D-disagree. Data collected from the questionnaire was nominal, giving quantitative aspects of the study since the questions were closed-ended. Additionally, standardization of the questionnaire ensured that the same set of questions are administered to all respondents who took part in the study.

### **3.5.2 In-depth Interviews**

In-depth interviews were carried out with key informants constituting a total of 38 participants - 8 pastors and 30 Abagusii leaders from all the 8 SDA church districts of Itumbe Station, South Kenya Conference. The goals of the in-depth interviews were to identify and obtain participants views about the implications of SDA church teachings on levirate customary practice with the attempt to find holistic (church and culture based)

solutions to problems facing widows in the church. Open-ended questions were employed to help the interviewees talk freely and permitted the researcher to understand the reality of widows in the church as was presented by the respondents through the responses that were gathered (Patton, 2000); they also enabled the respondents to give information on their life story and events in a sequence of their witness (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2013) on church teachings and levirate unions. The clusters for the interviews were encompassed of the elites (pastors, theologians and elders who are custodians of culture), who as described by Brinkmann and Kvale (2013) are leaders or experts on matters of church teachings and also of levirate unions, usually in controlling positions either in the church or in Abagusii traditional society. Their views were significant in this study since they were familiar with church teachings and the Abagusii culture on levirate marriage unions.

The in-depth interviews were conducted with planned meetings with pastors and Abagusii traditional leaders. Interview schedules ensured the incorporation of qualitative, in-depth data into the study since they presented an opportunity to respondents to explain themselves on the implications of the SDA church teachings on traditional levirate unions among the Abagusii Christian community members in Itumbe Station, South Kenya Conference. Pre-coded interview questions were used to create the interview schedules in order to quickly, affordably, and simply gather qualitative verbatim data. Due to their thoroughness, the interview schedules aided in elucidating and completing the material from the questionnaire (Kombo & Tromp, 2006).

### **3.5.3 Focused Group Discussions (FGDs)**

The study also employed FGDs for the 60 respondents from the cluster of 122 widows from the selected churches within all the 8 districts that constitute Itumbe Station of the

SDA church in Kenya. The choice of this tool for data collection was because of its engaging character on the issues directly affecting widows themselves that could lead to levirate marriage unions; it involved homogeneous group experiencing the hard condition of losing a partner and left with the responsibility of the family left behind with them. FGDs were based on the study themes stipulated in the study objectives: church marriage, church widow support systems and challenges widows face in both the church and the larger society. This made it possible for the study to produce unbiased, qualitative data that pass the generalizability test. Through more probing questions offered by the study, the conversations were intended to gain an in-depth insight of the attitudes, views, experiences, behaviors, motives, and perceptions on the topic of widowhood. Data from FGDs complemented that from the questionnaire and interviews, thereby giving strength to the study findings.

### **3.6 Validity and Reliability of the Study Instruments**

Data collection tools were subjected to validity and reliability tests before being used in the study to determine their effectiveness in obtaining information about the effects of the SDA church teachings on Abagusii levirate traditional practice in Itumbe Station, Kenya. Validity and reliability tests are study requirements.

#### **3.6.1 Validity of Research Instruments**

The study questionnaire, interview schedule questions and FGDs questions were subjected to a validation procedure to find out their power to measure the content of the data on the implications of the SDA church teachings on the Abagusii levirate union practice for Christians in Itumbe Station, South Kenya Conference. This was considered to be in tandem with Kothari (2009) who recommended that data collection instruments

should be subjected to validation to ascertain their ability to measure what they are required to qualify and quantify in the study. And Orodho, (2009) who asserted that validation of research instruments ensures that the results obtained through them are accurate, correct, believable, meaningful and in order. Since this is a qualitative procedural test, the tools were validated before being used in the final research. Copies of the study questions were distributed to several specialists in the fields of religion and theology, as well as in matters pertaining to churches and traditional practices, during the validation procedures. The specialists reviewed the research tools and drew attention to any mistakes that might have impacted the results (Heale & Twycross, 2015). This process removed ambiguities and vagueness from the implied research tools, enhancing the impact of the data that was subsequently gathered and analyzed.

### **3.6.2 Pilot Study**

A pilot study with the Pentecostal Assemblies of God (PAG) church in Nyamira county was conducted to test the reliability of the study instruments. The choice of the PAG church was because of its orthodoxy on core church values enshrined in her teachings and its encounter with traditional practices like levirate unions of the Abagusii traditional society. The pilot study was conducted with 30 participants who constituted 10% percent of the respondents as advised by Isaac and Michael (1995) who suggested 10 – 30 participants are ideal in a pilot study. The pilot study's objective was to compare the results and determine the validity of them in light of Church doctrine and customary levirate union procedures. In other words, piloting ensured that the results of the data analysis accurately reflected the findings of the investigation of the effects of SDA church teachings on the practice of levirate union among Abagusii Christians. The researcher

created questionnaires and interview guides that were given to participants in the pilot study in order to verify the validity of the study.

As a result, the pilot study testing fulfilled the following purposes: determine the typical amount of time needed to understand the questionnaire, provide an opportunity to evaluate how the questionnaire capacity is assessed, and assess the veracity of the study's conclusions. The results of the pilot study were not used in the main study, and neither were the responses from the pilot study used in the study's final report.

### **3.7 Data Collection Procedures**

According to research ethics and requirements, permissions to conduct research is fundamental. This includes data collection procedures, which encompass a series of activities to be followed before and during data collection time. In the context of this study, the researcher first obtained an introductory letter from Kisii University that was later on used to apply for the permit from the National Commission for Science Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) to conduct the study in Itumbe Station in South Kenya Conference. The researcher also sought permission from the leadership of the SDA church in Itumbe Station, South Kenya Conference to facilitate the collection of data from the participants of the church. A familiarization tour and identification of sites was done in the areas where data was gathered.

Secondly, in order to assure the effectiveness and quality of the data gathering procedure for excellent research outputs, the researcher additionally hired research assistants who helped with data collection. Together with the researcher, the assistants visited the churches and study participants and gave them the devices for gathering data. Before

giving the participants the questionnaire, the researcher made sure the assistants fully understood the type of information that was needed from them.

Finally, the researcher made prior appointments with the various target groups of the study before making a formal visit on the agreed days of the appointment. Interviews with key informants (pastors and church elders) and FGDs with widows and widowers were conducted on different agreed days.

### **3.8 Data Analysis and Presentation**

Since the study was qualitative and the design being descriptive, data analysis and presentation was done by use of qualitative approaches (Likert Scale and verbatim) as guided by the study objectives entailing specific themes. The study compiled responses to determine their agreements and disagreements, which helped to produce quantitative data and findings. This was later on presented through frequency tables, bar charts and pie-charts in the form of numbers and percentages. Verbatim data was analyzed thematically and presented in narrative and verbatim (Neuman, 2000). The researcher analyzed the data from the themes discussed and authenticated them using theoretical literature. Verbatim data aided in explaining individual experiences, feelings, reaction of the respondents on the various indicators of the study on the engagement of the church with the care of widows (Kumar, 2014.). Its main purpose was to underline critical issues and opinions about implications of SDA church teachings on Abagusii traditional levirate union for the good of affected widows or widowers.



### **3.9 Ethical Considerations**

Since the research involved a great deal of cooperation and coordination among many different calibers of people in different disciplines and even institutions, the researcher endeavored to remain within standards that promote collaborative work, such as trust, accountability, mutual respect, and fairness as advised by Blaxter, et al (2010) and (Kumar, 2014).

First, the study made sure that the respondents were informed about the research and provided the facts so they could decide whether or not to participate in it (Seale, et al., 2004). However, the researcher made it clear to the informants that taking part in the study was entirely optional and that it had only academic goals. This made them more willing to participate in the research because it earned their respect and trust.

Second, informed by (Saunders et al (2011)), the researcher collaborated with other researchers and upheld their intellectual rights and property by honoring their work. This was done by ensuring that there was no academic theft or plagiarism of any kind. This also ensured academic autonomy and freedom of researchers were respected. The study ensured open minded approach when carrying out research, without fear of intimidation yet observing the need to protect intellectual property of the informants and researchers (Mugenda, 2003).

Third, the researcher informed participants that unless they gave written authorization, their identities would not be included in the final report or in any other communications made during the course of the study. Since participants in the study had the option to not have their identities attached to the information they provided, no kind of coercion or

enticement of any kind was used to persuade them to participate. Based on this, participants' identity was key and kept confidential, which consequently encouraged and established good research working relationship for the achievement of verifiable data that was to bring objective outcomes for the study.

Fourth, informed by Kour (2014), the researcher ensured that there is no fabrication and falsification of data through fraud, manipulating, inventing or faking data or results which were then recorded or reported thereafter.

Finally, in conformity with the ethical department and authorization by NACOSTI, the study sought for all legal permits that were deemed to offer security and authority to the researcher and research assistance. Before conducting the inter-views, the researcher also obtained permission from church and Abagusii traditional leaders to conduct the research. This ensured from a legal perspective that there was no harm inflicted upon those or any individual who discloses sensitive information; legal permits take into consideration the interests of the individual participants.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

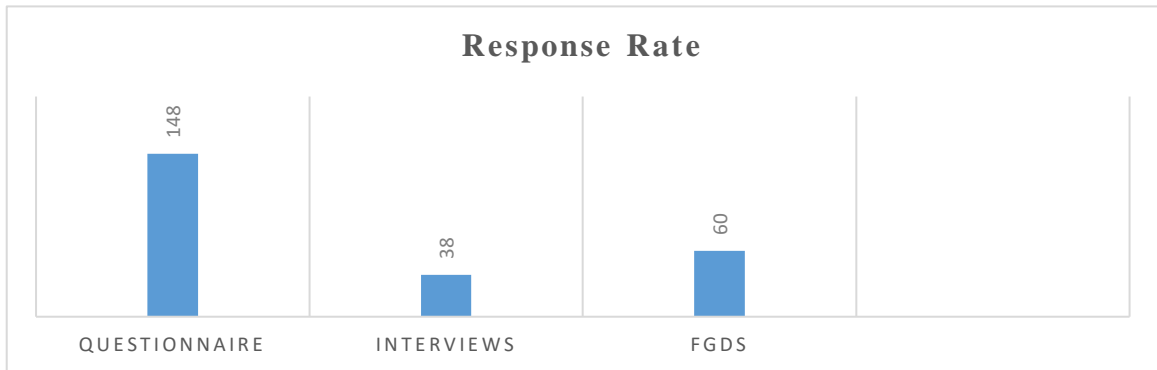
#### **4.0 Introduction**

The chapter discussed the data collected and presented the findings of the study on the implications of the church teachings, particularly the SDA church on levirate practice among the Abagusii community in Itumbe Station, South Kenya Conference. The discussions and presentation of the study findings were done based on the study objectives: establishing the Seventh Day Adventist church teaching on levirate practice for the well-being of widows; evaluation of SDA church support systems/programs for widows in the Seventh Day Adventist Church; examine the factors leading to the practice among the Abagusii community; and challenges facing levirate practice in selected Seventh Day Adventist churches in Itumbe Station, South Kenya Conference. To achieve these goals of the study, the chapter first examined the composition of the study groups: demographic information of the respondents, age, gender, level of education, employment, marital status, etc. The quantitative data obtained using questionnaires was analyzed using descriptive statistics, and presented through tables, bar charts, pie charts in the form of percentages and frequencies; while the qualitative data from interview schedules and FGDs was thematically transcribe, analyzed and presented in verbatim.

#### **4.1 Response Rate**

As it was indicated in Chapter Three above, the sample size of the study was 250 respondents, which included 152(62 widows, 60 family members and 30 church family life leaders) from the questionnaires, 38 participants in the interview schedules (8 pastors

and 30 Abagusii leaders) and 60 participants in the FGDs. Figure 2 below gives a summary of the response rate against the sample size.



**Figure 2: Response Rate**

**Source:** Field Data, 2023

From Chart 2 above, there were 148 informants who responded to the questionnaire out of the targeted sample size of 152 questionnaires that were distributed, representing a 97% response rate; 4 (2.6%) respondents did not return the questionnaire despite receiving them; there were no reasons given for their failure to return the filled questionnaires. For the interview schedules, all the 38 key informants participated, representing a return rate of 100%. Also the 60 widows for the focused group discussions participated in the study giving a 100% response rate. In total, there were 246 respondents out of the sample size of 250 with a response rate of 98%. The high response rate participation as an indicator in the study implied the interest the study population had on the SDA church teachings and levirate marriage union practices within the body of SDA church membership among the Abagusii community in Itumbe Station, South Kenya Conference; it also implied the collectivity of various vies and experiences of participants

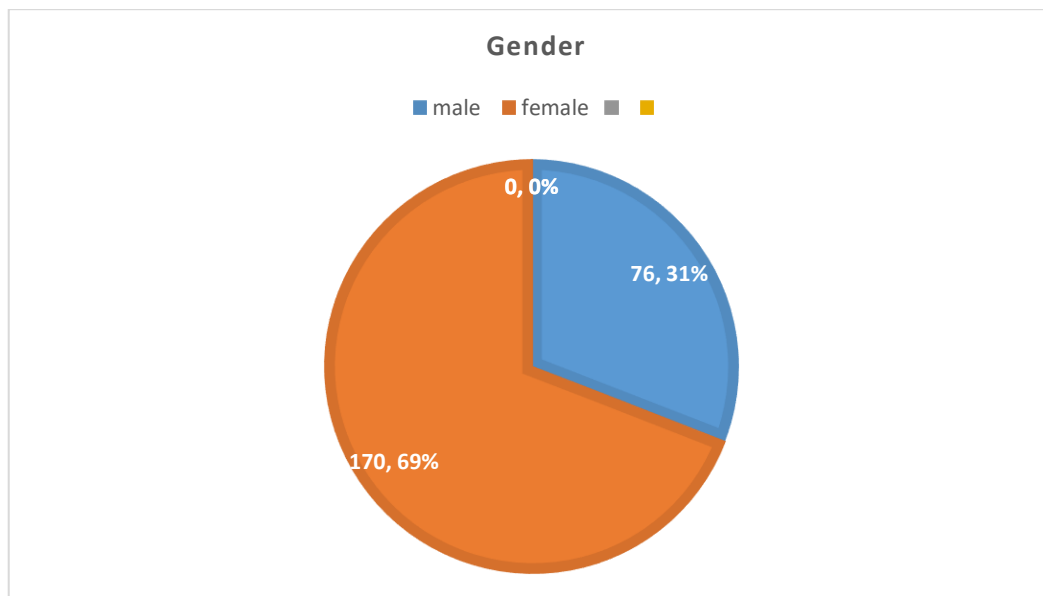
which give authenticity to the study findings since different views of the study population were captured.

## **4.2 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents**

Having established the response rate, and before discussions of the collected data, the study first sought to establish the demographic characteristics of the respondents with an aim of situating and understanding the true reality of widows in relation to the main objective of the study which is the implications of the SDA church teachings on levirate practice among the Abagusii community in Itumbe Station, South Kenya Conference. The features of the respondents discussed in this section included age, gender, level of education, employment, marital status, etc. The research in each section explained the nexus the implied elements have with the study variables articulated in the study objectives.

### **4.2.1 Distribution of Respondents by Gender**

The study sought to establish the gender of the respondents, which was done by asking each of the respondents to indicate his/her gender. The findings were as indicated in figure 3 figure below.



**Figure 3: Gender of the Respondents**

**Source:** Field Data, 2023

Figure 3 above indicates that 170 (69%) of all the 246 respondents were female, while 76 (31%) were male. Issue of gender and widowhood is critical in the SDA church, particularly in Itumbe Station, South Kenya Conference, Kenya. On gender, one of the respondents in the FGDs observed:

We women are most disadvantaged when it comes to the issue of remarriage; we are always in the victims of misfortunes and sometimes our cries fall in deaf ears of the church community and authority. Men pretend to speak for us, but issues affecting us women, especially widows are better articulated by us women who undergo tremendous negative family and marriage experiences (FGD 10).

Since the study is about levirate union which directly affected widows, it was appropriate to have more females in the study than males. The findings were in agreement with Brown et al (2012), who argued that widows have less chances of remarrying than widowers

since women are less likely to get spouses from younger age groups; this in essence opens a window for levirate unions than remarriage that is advocated by the SDA church. Gender issue was also supported by chapter three that indicated the requirement for FGDs as a data collection tool to collect data from the widows; it was done in view of the cluster of widows to incorporate their views and experiences in the study. Therefore, the consideration of gender was important in the study for gender heterogeneity and a holistic analysis of the findings where voices of both women and men were equally included in the study.

#### **4.2.2 Distribution of Respondents by Age Groups**

The research further endeavored to establish the age of the respondents. The age ensured involvement of relevant age groups in the collection and analysis of data that was thereafter discussed and presented. Table3 below indicates the results:

**Table 3: Age Groups of the Respondents**

Age	Respondents	Percentage
18 – 30	60	24%
31 – 40	110	45%
41 – 50	32	13%
51 – 60	26	11%
above 60	18	7%
Total	246	100

**Source:** Field Data, 2023

The results indicated that respondents of age group between those between 18 – 30 years formed 24%; 31 – 40 years constituted 45% forming the highest number of participants; those of the age bracket of 41 – 50 years constituted 32%; those at 51 – 60 group formed

11%; and those above 60 group formed 7%. Age was an important factor in the study since it aided the study in capturing the views and experiences of all age groups in matters of the SDA church teachings on marriage, and levirate unions as practiced by the Abagusii Christians in Itumbe Station, South Kenya Conference. Additionally, age was an important differential that contributed heavily on affected widows to either opt for levirate unions, remarry or remain single after the death of the husband. On this, one respondent in the FGDs discussions asserted:

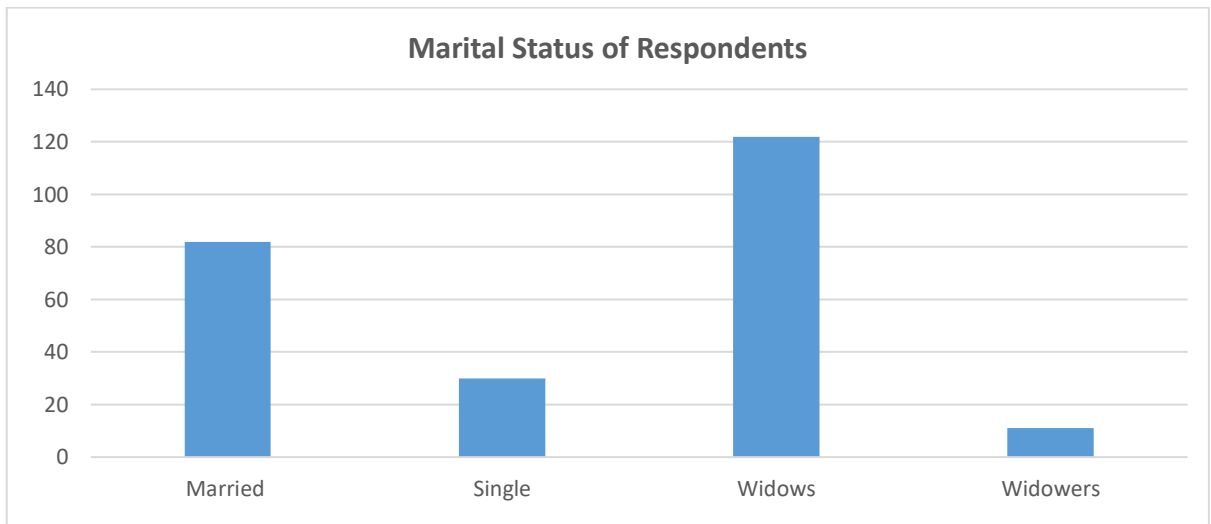
Women who opt for remarriage are those who are young since they have greater possibilities of remarrying and therefore the question of levirate union may not affect them. Moreover, they can easily find some young guy to marry them. But for those who are at advanced age opt to remain single or accept levirate marriage since most of them have many children with the deceased husband and there for find it difficult to abandon their children and remarry. Such women are more identified with the family of the deceased more than those that are young (FGDs 32).

The findings were in tandem with the study by Raymond Collins (2002) who reasoned that the “real widows” are women over sixty years of age whom the community was to register and take care of on the basis that these widows are not able to remarry anymore and are capable of deciding to live an acceptable Christian life and continue in their prayerful life. Therefore, the age was an important variable in examining widow’s experiences since it gave the study insights on the study gaps, while giving the challenges that existed between younger and older widows.



### 4.2.3 Distribution of Respondents by Marital Status

Further, this study sought to establish the status of the respondents in terms of not widowed, widowed or single by choice. This was realized by asking the respondents to indicate their marital status and the results were as in figure 4 below.



**Figure 4: Marital status of the Respondents**

**Source:** Field Data, 2023

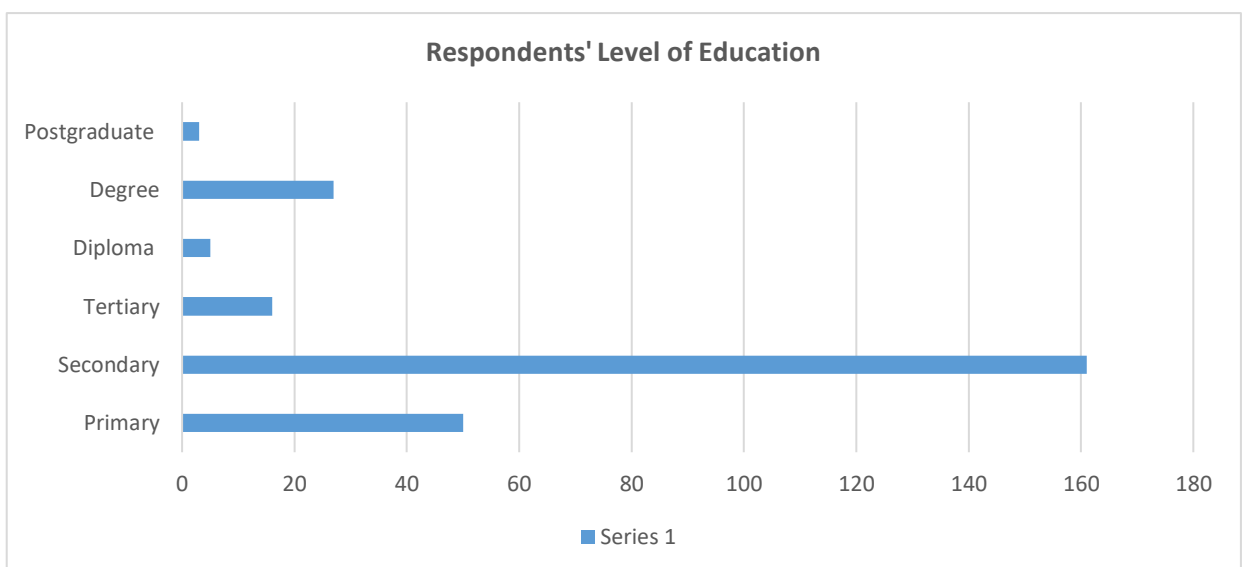
From Figure 4 above, 82 (33%) of participants were married, 122 (50%) were widows, 30 (12%) were single, and 12 (5%) were widowers. Those widowed formed the greatest majority of the study participants 134 (54%) constituting of widows and widowers.

In line with the chosen sampling techniques entailed in chapter three, the status of the respondents was purposively considered in the study as it helped to reflect the varied experiences of all groups in the study on the implications of the church teachings, particularly the SDA church on levirate practice among the Abagusii community in Itumbe Station, Kenya. Furthermore, marital status was a critical element in the study

because levirate custom is a form of marriage union affecting a particular group of church membership despite being condemned by the SDA church. It was also a factor that helped to incorporate views of participants that have experience on marriage that would qualify levirate unions to be real marriage.

#### 4.2.4 Respondents' Level of Education

The informants were asked to indicate their level of education. Figure 5 below indicates the results.



**Figure 5: Respondent's Level of Education**

**Source:** Field Data, 2023

The results in figure 4.4 indicated that majority of the respondents, 50 (20%) had primary education, 161 (65%) completed secondary school education, 16 (7%) tertiary level, 5 (20%) diploma, 27 (11%) degree, and only 3 (1%) had postgraduate education. Education was a critical factor in this study because it shows the ability of the respondents to critically express and address issues on the implications of the church teachings,

particularly the SDA church on levirate practice among the Abagusii community in Itumbe Station, South Kenya Conference. The findings demonstrated that most of the respondents were conversant with the issues asked in the questionnaires and therefore needed minimal assistance; they were able to comprehend the thematic issues in the questionnaires, interviews and FGDs. Informants had more understanding of the SDA church teachings and Abagusii culture on levirate marriage unions practiced by the same Christians confessing the SDA faith.

Moreover, education is not just acquiring knowledge but also enables people to constitute positive changes in themselves; it helps people to make rational decisions. Widows with education are more likely to understand the implications of levirate union custom for one to either like or avoid it. Furthermore, limited literacy level among church members and community is a breeding ground to out rightly condemn levirate custom without taking time to critically examine its implications on most vulnerable widows in the church.

Even though my levir provides everything for me, how I wished to have gotten a degree in education. I would be financially enabled to help him meet some of the household responsibilities. Lack of advanced form education inhibits me from having an ease access to the formal job sector (FGDs 5).

The same concern was reiterated by another widow participant who informed:

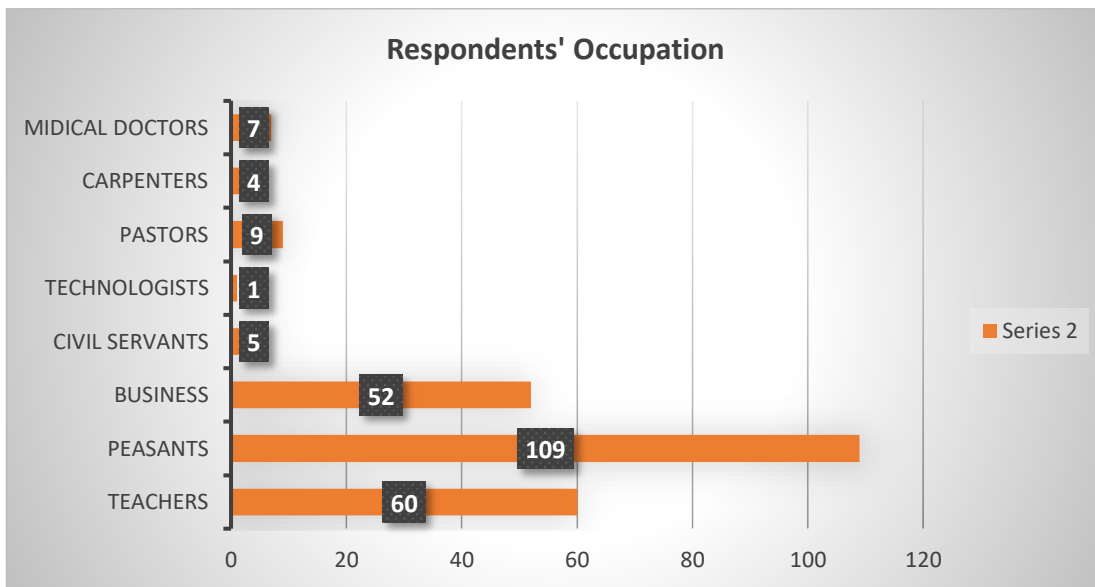
I choose not to involve myself in a levirate union and remained in the home of my deceased husband with my children. I don't have a university education and therefore did not manage to have a good paying job. I have no economic help of any kind with all the responsibilities to take care of my children. The family of

my deceased husband do not want to help me in any way. I am alone with my children (FGDs 44).

The findings echo that participants who had gone through formal education tend to have good jobs, good economic well-being, respect, and so on. Formal education acts as a source of power, which improves widows' financial status, even when they are in a levirate union relationship by enabling them to do business, have small-scale farming, and so on. The unemployed widows were found to characteristically lack any formal education or had only managed primary and some only secondary school level of education.

#### 4.2.4 Respondents' Occupation

The study sought to establish and discuss the respondents' occupation in terms of their income. The results were as illustrated in figure 6 below:



*Figure 6: Respondents' Occupation*

**Source:** Field Data, 2023

The study found that 7 (3%) were medical doctors, 4 (2%) carpenters, 9 (4%) pastors, 1 (0.4%) technologists, 5 (2%) civil servants, 52 (21%) businessmen, 109 (44%) peasants, a cluster which most if not all of the widows belonged, and 60 (24%) teachers. As explained in the preceding section, employment is an important factor that plays a greater role in the practice of levirate marriage unions in the SDA church in Itumbe Station, South Kenya Conference; it is a predictor of why levirate unions are preferred. When a husband who is a provider dies leaving behind unemployed widow there follows a chain of financial constraints. The widow needs a levir or economic empowerment to enable her respond to family material needs. Unemployment is associated with so many risk factors for the widows. Women who get married at a young age and do not have any formal employment, when they get widowed tend to specialize in domestic roles and have less human capital than women who spent time in the job market before getting married. This could pressure them into finding a new spouse to replace the human capital that their deceased husbands provided.

Another informant from the FGDs postulated;

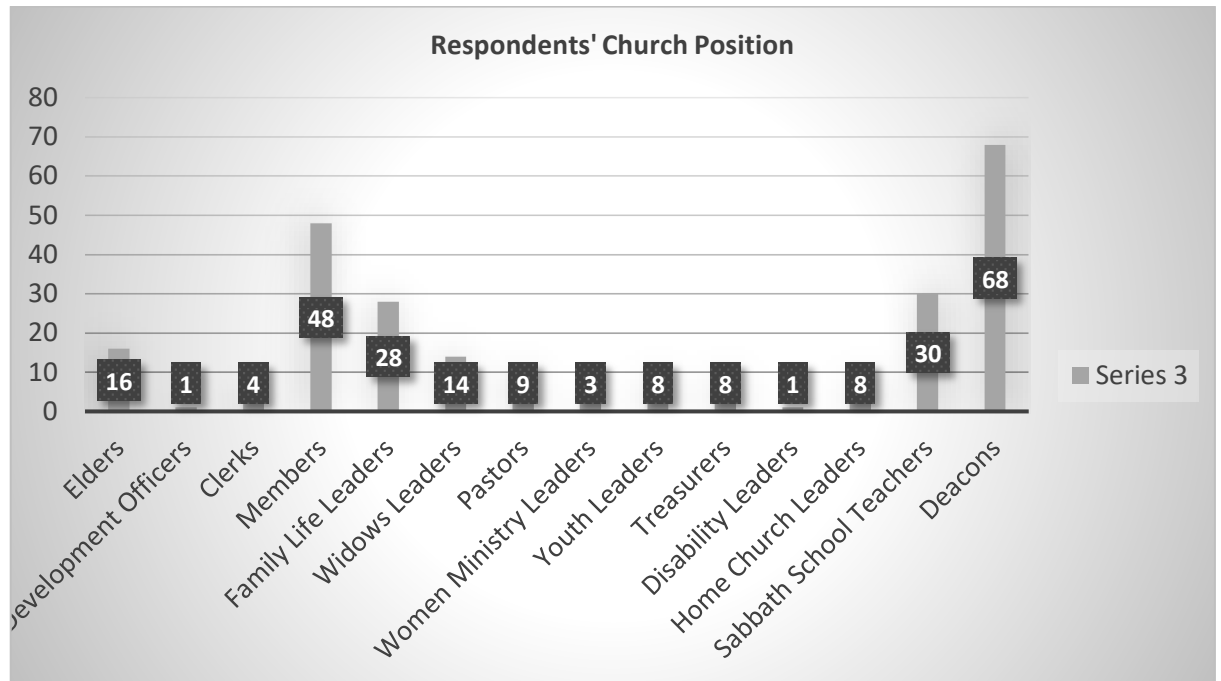
The SDA church in Itumbe Station, South Kenya Conference does not have any affirmative action in the church local communities from which widows come.

There are no micro-credit church institutions where widows can run for micro loans to enable them meet the needs of their children and themselves (FGDs 11).

According to the study, women who marry early tend to specialize in domestic tasks and have lower human capital than those who worked in the workforce for some time before to marriage. This can put pressure on them to marry again in order to replace the human capital that their spouses' passing contributed.

#### 4.2.5 Respondents' Church Position

Finally, the study looked at the church's position of the respondents. The results were as presented figure 7 below.



**Figure 7: Respondents' church Position**

**Source:** Field Data, 2023

Figure 7 indicates the respondents' church's position whereby the study found that 16 (7%) were church elders, 1 (0.4%) was a development officer, 4 (2%) were clerks, 48 (20%) were church members without any specific role to play, 28 (11%) were family life leaders, 15 (6%) were widows' leaders, 3 (1%) women ministry leaders, 10 (4%) youth leaders, 8 (3%) treasurers, 1 (0.4%) disability leader, 9 (4%) pastors, 8 (3%) home church leaders, 30 (12%) Sabbath School teachers, and 68 (28%) deacons. The respondents' position in the church was considered important as it helped in having a correct understanding and pastoral application of the SDA church's doctrine on marriage and

levirate practice among the Abagusii church membership and believers. It helped in the analysis and assessment of the SDA church pastoral ministry. And also engagement in the pastoral ministry of the church in relation to those charged by the church to take up that responsibility. The SDA church widow pastoral ministry is a task that cannot be carried out by any member of the church, but rather only by those whom the SDA church tasks this important ministry. Other church positions helped to give additional relevant information on the church widows that enabled the discussion and analysis of data for objective two on the church support systems.

### **4.3 Discussions of the Results of Specific Objectives**

After establishing and discussing the demographic data of the respondents, the study went further to discuss the results of specific objectives. This was carried out as informed by the two theories that informed the study: Structural Functional Theory and Family Systems Theory.

#### **4.3.1 Seventh Day Adventist church teaching on Levirate practice in Itumbe Station**

Objective one was on Seventh Day Adventist church teachings on marriage and levirate union custom as practiced by the Abagusii community members who are members of the SDA church in Itumbe Station. The discussion was classified into two categories: biblical exaltations and pastoral realized in a Likert scale format of 5 – 1, where SD – Strongly agree, D – Disagree, N – Neutral, A – Agree, and SA – Strongly agree.

*a. Theological views on Marriage and Widowhood*

The respondents were asked to express their perception, feelings and regard to the SDA church teachings on marriage and levirate union custom. Table 4 below presents the results.

**Table 1: Biblical exaltations on Marriage and Levirate practice for the well-being of widows**

Item	SD	D	N	A	SA	Total
Marriage is permanent	R-22 %-14.9	5 3.4	8 5.4	4 2.7	109 73.6	148 100 %
Widows to remarriage or remain unmarried	R-4 %-2.7	4 2.7	60 40.5	20 13.5	60 40.5	148 100 %
Levirate union is biblical and good for widows to embrace it	R-10 %-6.8	13 8.8	10 6.8	22 14.9	93 62.8	148 100 %
Marriage is monogamous	R-11 %-7.4	12 8.1	1 0.7	2 1.4	123 83.1	148 100 %
Marriage must be solemnized by the church minister	R-0 %-0.0	2 1.4	1 0.7	22 14.9	123 83.1	148 100 %

Key: R – Respondents, %-Percentage

Source: Field Data, 2023

Results in table 4 indicate that 27 (18.2%) were of the opinion that marriage is not a permanent union, 8 (5.4%) were undecided and 113 (76.3%) were of the opinion that marriage is a permanent union. These views were complemented by those in the interview



schedules where participants were asked whether death marks the end of marriage and a participant informed:

No, death doesn't mark the end of marriage because according to the Abagusii culture, marriage proceeds even after the death of the husband. With the death of the husband, the widow is never allowed to leave the home of the deceased husband. Instead, she has to continue as a wife in that home (KINF2).

The findings are supported by both the Old and New Testaments (Isaiah 1, 23; 10, 1-2; Jeremiah 7, 4-16; Matthew 19:1-12; Mark 10:1-12; 1Timothy 5:3-8, and so on) where marriage is as permanent union between one-man and one-woman coming together to form one flesh bound by mutual consent.

On the theme of remarriage, the findings specify that according to the church's theological teachings, 8 (5.4%) argued that the widow is allowed to remarry or remain unmarried after the death of the husband. The sentiment of this data were reproduced by a participant in the interviews who informed:

The practice of levirate custom is outdated and primitive. The Bible puts it clear in 1 Timothy 5:14 that let the young widows be free and re-marry so that they may not overburden the church. The culture will not allow the widow to re-marry; the elderly to remain faithful to their first pledge and continue caring for their children. However, the issue is, who is ready to marry a widow? If she has young children, should she go with them? Will the second husband accept to carry the responsibility of caring the children that are not his? What if the deceased husband's parents are too old to care for the children? This sometimes leaves the church at a crossroad (KINF13).

Echoing these sentiments, another participant added:

God's grace is enough for widows and they need not to remarry or opt for any form of marriage. It is of great importance for widows to commit themselves to God in prayer, to study and follow the Bible teachings, to attend church functions and to serve in the church. These all help them to grow in the grace of God, which will sustain them through all manner of challenges they face.

The voiced field data sentiments are in line with 1 Corinthians 7:8-9, 39-40 and 1 Timothy 3:9-16 where not to remarry was considered an honorable, indeed exemplary thing, widows encouraged dedicate themselves to the life of fasting and prayer to God; God's grace is explained as an integral part in a widow's ability to move on with life. While some force widows to remarry for various reasons, this organization of widows and Christians supports voluntary celibacy as the best good for every widow. Such positions are justified by their adherence to religion, God's favor, and celibacy as a higher ideal. However, the findings also show that 60 (40.5%) were neutral, and relatively the majority 80 (54.0%) were not of the idea of new marriage or remain unmarried as advocated by church in the Holy Scriptures. On this position, a participant in the study postulated:

The Gusii people believe that the widow can't re-marry outside the family because if she re-marries the deceased husband's family lineage is disrupted and there the spirit of the death husband will haunt the widow. Marriage is not a contract that ends with the death of the husband (KINF5).

Informed by the functional theory, the distinguishing feature brought out by the Abagusii culture realized through a levirate custom is that marriage is not a social contract that ends with the death of the husband. This view of participants does not agree with the SDA

church theological teaching on marriage as a temporal social contract. However, the same SDA church position to deny levirate union finds a serious biblical challenge as expressed in Luke 20:28-31 where Jesus was temptatiously asked:

Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and have children for his brother. Now there were seven brothers. The first one marries a woman and died childless. The second and then the third married her, and in the same way the seven died, leaving no children. Finally, the woman died too. Now then, at the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her? (KINF7)

The most indicting issue is that Jesus did not condemn levirate custom of the Jews but rather gave a philosophical reaction locating marriage as a human earthly enterprise. Jesus response did not condemn the practice of levirate marriage custom since it did not have a proper theological basis to warrant its condemnation. However, the point to note was that the SDA church selectively uses biblical texts and reasons to discourage levirate custom practices.

On the theological biblical exaltations, the study further sought to examine the Christian notion of marriage as a monogamous endeavor. The findings in table 4.2 demonstrated that 23 (15.4%) disagreed with the view of marriage as monogamy, 1 (0.7%) was undecided, while the majority 125 (84.5%) affirmed that marriage in Christian faith and practice is a strictly monogamous institution solemnized through a wedding. The aspect of solemnization was exhibited by the overwhelming majority of 145 (98%) respondents who affirmed it. A participant in the study interviews informed:

Levirate union is not a proper form of marriage; it is unlawful because the widow is not the brother-in-law's wife, it lacks a wedding ceremony, and therefore a form of fornication and adultery, which the church cannot allow (KINF15)..

Another orthodox position was affirmed by a participant in the interviews who informed:

Levirate custom often leads to a form of polygamous marriage, which is not allowed by the SDA church and Christianity. God created one man and one woman, and commissioned them to go and multiply; any form of marriage (polygamy, polygyny including marriages of the same sex) that does derive from this divine command is therefore a deviation from that norm and commission.

This overwhelming response could mean that structurally the SDA church holds on the teaching in Genesis 2:24, which states that “Therefore, a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh.” Basing on this the church does not allow any marriage arrangement that would be sympathetic to widows wishing to maintain their previous matrimonial homes. The position of the study findings is supported by Baloyi (2012) who advanced a religious argument that levirate marriage unions support polygamy in the sense that if the brother of the deceased man was already married at the time of his death, the levir (one to marry the widow) would not be expected to divorce his legal wife, rather take up the widow as his second wife. However, if monogamy is taken to be the only and rightfully religiously ordained form of marriage as taught by the SDA church, how does the same church explain other forms of marriage in the Holy Scriptures? For instance, a participant in the FGDs in disagreement with the church teaching asked the question:

How does the church reconcile her position with the text from Isaiah 4: 1 which says: ‘seven women will take hold of one man, in that day, ... say we will eat our own bread and wear our own clothing, only let us be called by your name, and take away our nakedness’? (KINF27).

This field data informed that there are varieties or forms of marriage in the Bible: monogamy, polygamy, concubinage, and levirate unions. In the Holy Scriptures, marriage arises in a variety of settings: arranged directly by God, for example those of Adam and Eve (Gen. 2) and Hosea and Gomer (Hos. 1); organized by the father, as in the case of Isaac and Rebekah (Gen. 24). In the same Old Testament there are numerous samples of polygamous men of God (Gen. 24:57): Abram is a notable example where his wife Sarah gave him her servant, Hagar, to produce offspring for stead. God raised the people of Israel through Jacob’s two wives and two concubines (Gen. 31) and many other marriage examples. These biblical texts challenge the SDA church theological position on monogamous marriages as the only authentic marriages.

Furthermore, the doctrine of remarriage preached by the church does not resonate with the reality on the ground. For instance, all widows that participated in the study informed:

Despite being members of the church following the church teachings as expected, children are always opposed to any proposal made for a remarriage; instead they accept levirate unions since they are identified with the family of their deceased father (FGDs 14).

On this, church elders in the interviews hinted:

Even though remarriage is a biblical requirement, it is important to involve children in the process of remarriage by seeking their consent, and if they are opposed to it, then it is better that the widow remains unmarried, consecrate her life to the Lord in prayer and service to the church (KINF16).

Some church widows, who had tough and dehumanizing experiences in their remarriage, while out rightly condemning remarriage, recounted their story. One discussant narrated her ordeal:

I remarried as taught and advised by the church, but it was a traumatizing experience. My new husband never wanted my children, especially the boys. All the time mistreating my children, forcing me to return them to my parents or to the home of my deceased husband. But I had already got other two children with him I could not abandon my children with the deceased husband. I chose to suffer with them until my new husband also died. Upon the death of my second husband, his family was on me accusing me causing the death of their son. Life became unbearable. Now that my sons with the first husband were grown enough, they asked me to go back to the home of my first deceased husband. On my return, we found that all the land that belonged to my first deceased husband was already sold by his brothers whom I refused to contract a levirate marriage union even after being besieged by the clan elders. I regret why I did not commit myself to levirate marriage. At the moment my children have nothing of their own, no home and no family (KINF16).

While another discussant in the FGDs added:

I remarried when I had one girl child. At a very tender age of my child, my so called second husband turned my daughter into his wife. He continuously assaulted her sexually till I decided to move back to the home of my previous deceased husband. Going back there the family did not accept me together with my daughter. Since I lost my parents when I was young, I had nowhere to go to. I decided to begin life in town; a life that is painful to narrate to you now (FGDs 37).

From the findings and reactions of the respondents, it can be deduced that the SDA church in Itumbe Station has not taken time to contextualize the Abagusii levirate marriage custom. Instead, the church in a structured manner selectively uses the Holy Scriptures to encourage young widows to remarry or remain unmarried to create the negative perception about levirate practices at large (Mombo&Joziasse, 2011).

***b. SDA church Pastoral Teaching and Position on the marriage and Levirate Marriage custom***

On pastoral grounds to marriage and levirate marriage custom, respondents were asked to express their perception, feelings and regard to the SDA church teachings on marriage and levirate union custom. This was done thematically as presented in table 5 below.

**Table 2: SDA church Pastoral Teaching and Position on the marriage and Levirate**

**Marriage custom**

Item	SD	D	N	A	SA	Total
Remarried widows are entitled to have children	R-6 %-4.1	10 6.8	100 67.6	20 13.5	12 8.1	148 100%
Levirate unions involve sexual intimacy	R-10 %-6.8	6 4.1	20 13.5	12 8.1	100 67.6	148 100%
Levirate unions not accepted and considered sinful	R-7 %-4.7	11 7.4	6 4.1	20 13.5	104 70.3 %	148 100%
The church is losing members in levirate unions	R-8 %-5.4	10 6.8	20 13.5	25 16.9	85 57.4	148 100%
The church is right to prohibit levirate unions	R-85 %- 57.4	25 16.9	20 13.5	10 6.8	8 5.4	148 100%
Levirate marriage unions are bad for the church	R-101 %- 68.2	11 7.4	20 13.5	10 6.8	6 4.1	148 100%

Key: R – Respondents, %-Percentage

Source: Field Data, 2023

The results in table 5 indicate the views of the study respondents on thematic issues. First, the respondents were asked to indicate whether according to the church teachings, remarried widows are allowed to have children in their new contracted marriage, despite having others from her earlier marriage. The responses were varied with 16 (10.8%) disagreeing, 100 (67.6) being undecided, and 32 (21.6%) in agreement to have children in the new marriage. The majority of the undecided made the study probe more on the issue of a widow to bear children in the new marriage. From the interviews, the respondents had mixed reactions on this. For instance, one respondent asserted:



Yes, widows in the new contracted marriage should have children; children are a sign of entitlement which enables them to stay in the new marriage. Furthermore, marriage to be consummated must have a child; procreation consummates a marriage (KINF23).

Paraphrasing the sentiments on the informants, they suggested that instead of a widow indulging in sexual immorality, she should consent to levirate marriage union. A discussant who has since been in a levirate marriage union was of a different opinion. She informed:

Sexual urge was not one of her reasons for my consenting to a levirate marriage relationship. Being alone and unable to meet family demands as driven by high cost of living pushed me to a remote corner to accept levirate custom. The reason of my levirate marriage is to nurture the children left to me by my deceased husband in the context of his family in a manner that he wanted (FGDs 18).

The same sentiments were echoed by another participant in the in interviews who informed:

It is not necessary to have children in the new levirate union because levirate union is also meant to support the widow emotionally, materially and socially and even psychologically, to make sure that the children of the deceased husband have shelter, clothing and education, and so on. Sex is not a must but it is a requirement under the mutual agreement between the Levir and the widow. There is no any other pressing reason (KINF12).

The point the study found is that many widows in the SDA church opt for levirate marriage not on promiscuity grounds but for other genuine reasons such as economic, social (to belong or achieve certain end), therapeutic or cultural, which the church is challenged to address. On this grounds, the study noted that it is unfair to stereotype the reality of widows who engage in levirate marriage considering it a sinful practice and even those who opt to remarry as preached by the church. The SDA church is challenged to de-link levirate custom meant for the care of widows and orphans from sexual intercourse and other incidences of exploitation; be prudent in laying unwarranted emphasis on the sexual aspects of the custom which have turned it into a mere platform for sexual gratification and therefore undesired by the church.

Second, there were those who asserted that according to the SDA church levirate union is sinful and therefore unacceptable by the church. On this theme, the findings in table 4.3 indicate that 18 (12.2%) disagreed, 6 (4.1%) were undecided and a majority 124 (83.8%) affirmed that the SDA church regards levirate unions sinful and therefore unacceptable practice for the church faithful widows. The same was reiterated by a respondent from the interview schedules who argued:

Levirate marriage is a form of slavery to the widow since it denies her the freedom to remarry outside the home of her deceased husband as preached by the church; she cannot set up an independent home and so to her future. She is inherited but not given an inheritance from her husband since the inheritance is for children of the deceased husband. Therefore, she cannot own any property of her own with the freedom to dispose it as she wishes (KINF19).

Another participant from the interviews postulated:

The widow should go and re-marry elsewhere and it is silent on the welfare of the children. When a man dies the marriage vows cease to effect because its only death that parts them but levirate union is wrong because it encourages polygamy which is unacceptable in the Christian faith (KINF20).

The study noted that such denouncing church positions contradict the very biblical principles of levirate custom (Genesis 38:8-10) and also consider widows in levirate unions in isolation from the SDA church membership and from the community of the deceased husbands which they belong. The church position expressed through above field findings are inconsistent with Carol Meyers, et al. (2000) made an argument in favor of the levirate custom, stating that the levirate rule is actually the only law in the Bible that contains an act of humiliation as a punishment against the offender, the levir who refuses to take up his deceased brother's widow. This implies that it is a strict law that demands strict adherence and that breaking it would be extremely bad. The study affirmed that belonging to the community of the deceased husband does not contradict freedom, but is rather necessary for freedom. The widow belongs to her deceased husband's family and community and consequently, they too belong to her; it is this reciprocal belonging that forms the context for her relationships with her children, the rest of the deceased husband's community, which is not entirely pegged on sexual intimacy alone as advocated by the SDA church (KINF01).

Inclusively, in respect to the freedom of the widow, her consent was sought to ascertain the person she likes to live with; the widow is never forced into levirate union, rather she is to consent to it. However, just as it is advocated by Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:39, the study

argued that the concept of freedom is not an absolute one; the freedom of widows to remarry advocated in this text was not absolute for there were constraints attached to the obligations to be fulfilled: the proposed marriage had to be ‘in the Lord’, and presumably the husband, too, had to be willing to marry. So, to in levirate unions, the two are not forced to, since the widow has to consent, the levir too must be willing to take up the responsibility to care for his deceased brother’s family. This is fundamental because a widow’s union with the levir is considered to be a continuation of the same family and relationship with her deceased husband. There is nothing secretive, shameful or illicit about it within the Abagusii community. The union is witnessed by community elders’ meeting who choose the younger brother of the deceased, and that the relationship begins with the proposed brother’s (levir) acceptance of the widow as his real wife, taking up all the responsibilities of the husband. However, the study was cognizant of the fact that there are cases where this noble practice is abused as was echoed by one discussant in the FGDs who narrated:

When my late husband’s family and community elders suggested one of my brothers’ in-law, whom I also like to have me as his wife, he consented. We started living together very well and our relationship as a couple was pretty well. As time went by, things changed, he consumed all the property left to me by his late brother; educated his children from his first wife. Used all the property I had from my deceased husband. He even started selling the land left to me and my children. This went on till the clan elders had to intervene. He later left me and returned to his real wife (FGDs 58).

Of course, there are cases of this type, as reiterated by Abuya (2002) who argued that the noble custom of taking care of the widows and orphans sometimes turns its back on the very ideals for which it was created. However, it would be wrong for the SDA church to

denounce the Abagusii levirate custom on the grounds of some corrupted people who take advantage of it to exploit the widows and consume their wealth, without providing proper guardianship that is initially envisioned in the custom.

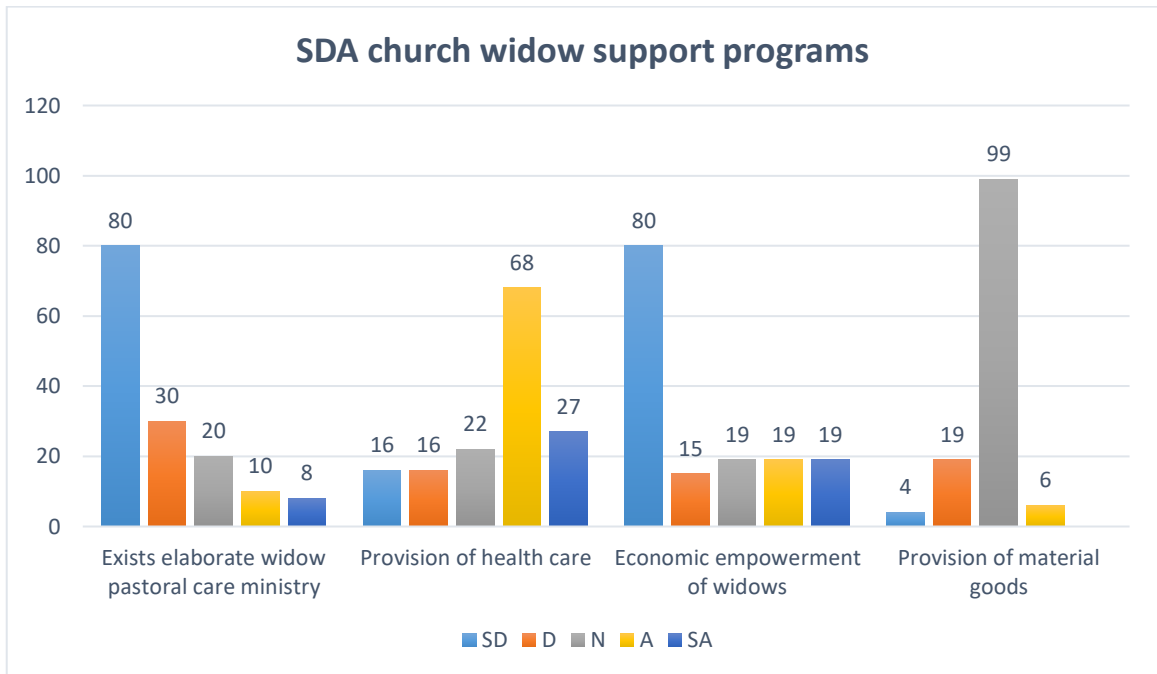
#### **4.3.2 Church Support programs for Widows in the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Itumbe Station**

Having discussed and presented the findings of objective one, the study sought to establish and examine SDA church support systems for widow. This was key in the study since it helped to contextualize the findings of objective one on the SDA church teachings on widowhood. Therefore, objective two was geared to give what the church thinks and is doing as an alternative to levirate marriage custom. Advised by Lindiwe (2015; Mwangi, 2014), widows face innumerable challenges that come with the loss of a spouse, which include discriminatory regards, isolation, poor access to basic services like healthcare, material poverty, psychosocial trauma, demoralization, fearfulness, emptiness, helplessness and abandonment to loneliness. This state of affairs raises the need for church support systems that openly profit widows. Church widow support systems are meant to comfort, support and encourage widows so that they find understanding of their condition in Christian faith.

Therefore, the study sought to examine the effectiveness of church support systems or programs enshrined within her pastoral ministry for widows. To realize this, the study employed a Likert scale approach, as represented regressively by numbers 5 – 1, where SD – Strongly agree, D – Disagree, N – Neutral, A – Agree, and SA – Strongly agree. For precision purposes, the discussion and presentation of the study findings were done apparently in two levels: physical and spiritual/psychological levels.

**a. Physical church-widow support programs**

The respondents were asked to express their perception, views, feelings and regard to the SDA church’s widow support systems in Itumbe Station. Figure8 below presents the results:



**Figure 8: SDA church widow support programs**

**Source:** Field Data, 2023

As shown in figure8, on the exists of an elaborate widow pastoral care ministry/program, the respondents specified as follows: 110 (74.3%) respondents were generally in disagreement that there are elaborate widow pastoral care ministry/program; 20 (13.5%) were undecided, and a minority consisting of 18 (12.2%) of the respondents were in agreement of the existence of such a program in the SDA church Itumbe Station, South Kenya Conference. These findings were quite indicting on the side of the church that lays emphasis on widows either remarrying or remain unmarried but not accept Abagusii

levirate marriage custom. In the absence of such program, the church does not provide a place where widows can be heard as they express themselves. The findings from the questionnaire are replicated in the interviews and FGDs, where participants had to say the following:

The church does not have any meaningful elaborate program for widows; even in the SDA church manual you can find children and youth ministry, women ministry but not directly widow ministry that is charged with the affairs of widows in the church. It is, therefore, unfair to condemn any platform that gives widows a meaning in their lives. The existing things are just initiatives from individual church groups, initiatives that are not structure and not under the structural organization of the church's pastoral plan (FGDs44).

Another participant in the FGDs explained:

The absence of a structured pastoral program for widow care is a signifier that the SDA church community seems not to consider the issue of the needy widows as a problem in the church. If the purpose of widow care is to express compassionate love to the bereaved widows and their deceased family as the case in the Holy Scriptures, then it is difficult to understand the position of the church on levirate unions. It is unfair to condemn levirate unions. The inability to care for the widows by the church means that the same church should also not overlook the positive aspects of levirate cultural custom as practiced by the Abagusii traditional community that also confesses the SDA church faith and teachings (FGDs16).

While another participant, acknowledging lack of clear widow care program suggested:

There is need to have official nominated committee comprised of widows with special programs which keep them busy. These programs should be chaired by the widows with a church elder as their adviser and if possible be funded by the church and well-wishers (KINF19).

However, another participant was of a different opinion and he argued that the ministry for widow care exists, but does not perform well.

In the church tradition, the mandate of the church is to take care of widows and orphans and that is why we have so many orphanages to take charge of this. Within this church teachings, the church in an individualized manner responds to it. However, it also true that this has not performed well (KINF11).

However, the sentiments raised in field findings were critical. Any contextualized ministry for widow care should entail what the church is doing to enrich widows that are in its congregation, and also a ministry by the widows themselves for themselves and others in the church. Such kind of widows' led ministry is able to realistically address the reality of the widows and thereby giving a justification for denouncing any practice like levirate unions that in a practical manner attend to the situation of widows. The lack of a clear widow program pointed out in the field was reflected in the study where widows were found not to have any meaningful source of income except peasant farming and other quick jobs. The study noted that this reality shows the neglect of widows by the church and the embracement of Abagusii levirate marriage custom that has a clear though unwritten support systems for widows.



On the provision of health care, 31(20.9%) of the respondents are in disagreement, 22 (14.7%) were neutral and 95 (64.2%%) were of the opinion that the church does provide health services to the widows. This was reiterated in the interview schedules where a participant informed:

The church has support systems/programs for widows. It provides widows with good health care, occasionally doctors are invited to various church centers to provide cancer screening, checking of sugar level, high blood pressure that is done of charge (KINF3).

However, the results from the interviews and FGDs were not in agreement with the idea that widows get good health services from the church medical facilities and programs. Informant from the interview schedules reported:

As widows, we appreciate the free and sometimes less costly medical services we get from the church, it is also important to say that they are basic services. When one gets a serious illness [in her home, may be herself or the child] that require specialized attention the church disappears, the widow who has practically has nothing is left on herself (FGD42).

The argument made here is that a widow, who lost her spouse without leaving her any property or means of support, is dependent on her community, her family, and the local Christian church. But in the practical sense, especially during hard times of health difficulties, this is not the case. This contradicts the very reality of the church teachings where the well-being of widows is given a top most priority by both the Christian community and families of the widows. Basic health services are important but they are not enough to cover the problems of health that recur every time.

On provision of material basic needs like food, shelter, education the results in table 4.4 indicated that 23 (15.5%) did not agree that the church fully takes charge of this service of provision of material needs, 99 (66.9%) of the respondents, which is the majority were undecided – not having clear knowledge of the church’s role in this aspect of widows’ lives, while 26 (17.6%) were in agreement that the church indeed provides for the material needs of the widows in Itumbe Station, South Kenya Conference. Acknowledging what the church does for them, discussants in the FGDs informed:

The material support we get from the church community comes in the form of individual charitable donations like second hand clothes and little food that lasts for a day or two, which is not enough (FGDs 18).

The finding is in agreement with Clinton (2008) who observed that young widows receive inadequate support systems from the church, family and friends leaving them with the task to shoulder all responsibilities of bringing up children under their care on their own. Another participant in the interviews noted:

When it comes to the provision of shelter, we must acknowledge that it takes long for the Christian community to respond; widows who are affected in the community leave under deplorable conditions when it comes to the question of shelter. When their houses collapse widows and children are rained on, exposed to severe cold; this takes place under the watch of local church community leaders. It takes lots of energy to mobilize the Christian community to rebuild a semi-permanent structure (KINF09).

While on the issue of education, this was alarming as almost all participants in the FGDS had to say:

Our children are at home without going to school due to lack of very basic educational items like exercise books, pens, uniforms. The government says that there is free education, but there is nothing of the sort. Children are sent home now and then to collect money for tuition. All these things, as widows we cannot afford since we are busy looking for food to feed them as they cannot be in school without food. Our children are condemned to a life of ignorance and their future jeopardized by lack of basic education (FGDs28).

Given the extreme levels of poverty in Itumbe State, the findings showed that the majority of widows lamented their difficulties in making ends meet and in adequately supporting their children and other dependents on their meager incomes, which they frequently supplemented with income from the sales of subsistence produce, sporadic gifts, and handouts from friends and well-wishers. Because they lack the necessary security or collateral to obtain the sizeable cash sums required to return profits, many reported that they even fear joining local private financial institutions. They are afraid that their modest property will be seized if they fail to repay their loans on time.

The findings of the study, therefore, implied that the widows are more vulnerable since some of them depend solely on the alms collected and the good will of the people. This unstructured manner in which the SDA church in Itumbe Station responds to the needy widows gives an opening whereby they do not receive full tangible support. Even though a structured manner of caring for the needy widows may have its shortcomings like the case of widows in Jerusalem (1 Timothy 5:3-16) it is a form of widow care that cannot

be ignored. Of course individual initiatives are important, but for better control purposes the structured mode if well-coordinated is more inclusive. However, the findings corresponded with those of Kapuma (2011) and Nickelson (2017) which state that the churches do not address the financial issues that plague the widows during and after their husband burial; low economic status affects widows' wellbeing in a negative way.

On economic empowerment, the study looked at the church's provision of financial support to widows for their economic development, training of widows for economic development, entrepreneurial sensitization workshops and seminars to empower widows in the church. The results were as specified in table 4.5 above., where 95 (64.2%) of the respondents were in disagreement of the SDA church economically empowering widows; 15 (10.1%) of the respondents were undecided, and 38 (25.7%) supported the thesis that the SDA church empowers women economically. Collectively, participants in the FGDs argued:

Financial support of widows contributes directly to economic development of their families and the Christian community at large; however, the SDA church plays a minimal role in this area. There are no microfinance institutions owned by the church where we can go and get loans to grow up ourselves economically (FGDs33).

The argument concurs with the sentiments from one of the participant in the FGDs who lamentably said:

The trainings we get from the church are more of spiritual development, family life. There are no training and sensitization of members on the economic development. This is left to the purview of individual widows without support from the church. Some of us, individually have attended trainings and economic skill development

sensitization workshops organized by the governments, but what can such trainings help without capital to initiate economic projects! (FGDs 43)

Involving widows in economic activities is one of the ways of building self-confidence, improving skills, and fulfilling their multifaceted needs through collective church action. The findings suggest that economic widow financial empowerment and entrepreneurial skill development are important since they provide them various avenues to access information, and enable them to be self-reliant. This was earlier own affirmed by Human Rights Watch (2010) which informed that many widows in Kenya grieve in a lot of economic hardships, after the death of the husband, especially when he was the sole bread winner. But, unfortunately, the SDA church is not fully engaged in finding ways to financially empower the affected widows in her membership. Lacking economic plan for widows consequently implies that they cannot develop their knowledge and initiatives, which in essence condemns the widows into perpetual poverty and beggars in the church. Reluctance of the SDA church to grow widows financially diminishes their ability the avenues where widows can seek financial help. The SDA church does not take care of the widows by initiating income generating projects to empower the widows. It does not do table banking whereby the widows can borrow money for their self-sustenance and therefore relieve the church from burden.

The results are at odds with Wagenfeld-Heintz's (2009) assertion that churches' social contributions to society—such as aiding the underprivileged and vulnerable members of society, fostering happier marriages, reducing violence against women, fostering increased moral community obligations, and encouraging charitable giving and volunteerism—form the cornerstone of a community's social development. Empowering

widows economically makes them productive members in the areas of the economy, education, and property ownership for the families and society at large.

***b. Spiritual/Psychological church-widow support programs***

Widows do not only need material provisions for there are other needs that are unquantifiable that the Church may not be capable of providing. Advised by Kavenly (2006), the study did not limit itself only to the material and physical needs of the widows – the involvement with the widows in the material coordinates of their lives, nor did it allow them to be simply passive members in the community. Rather, the study went further to discuss the findings on other non-material aspects of the widows' lives and the contribution the same widows can make to the well-being and spiritual development of each other and of the local church believers in the study area. This was important because widows are resourceful church members who through the order of widows can involve themselves in the pastoral ministry of the church in areas like house visitations, spiritual counseling where they can console and pray with the sick members of the Christian community who feel desolate, giving them hope of life based on their own experiences as widows. As well, from their experience they can give practical teachings to younger widows on how to support their families in times of suffering like death. This engagement of widows in the pastoral ministry of the church makes them useful members of the church, which reciprocally gives them the hope that not all is lost to death of their dear husbands.

On the basis of these assertions, the study identified five areas where the respondents were asked to express their perception, views, experiences, feelings and regard to the

SDA church’s widow support systems in Itumbe Station. Table 6 below presents the results:

**Table 6: SDA church widow psychosocial support programs**

Item	SD	D	N	A	SA	Total
House visitations of widows for companionship	R-00 %-0.0	00 0.0	00 0.0	20 13. 5	128 86. 5	148 100%
Self-help church groups for widows	R-00 %-0.0	00 0.0	00 0.0	21 14. 2	127 85. 8	148 100%
Spiritual counseling (spiritual needs)	R-00 %-0.0	00 0.0	00 0.0	18 12. 2	138 93. 2	148 100%

*Key: R – Respondents, %-Percentage*

**Source:** Field Data, 2023

Results in table 6 show that the SDA church has psycho-social/spiritual systems to cater for non-material aspects of widows. On the theme of home visitations, there was overwhelming responses on how the church is fully active in paying visits to the widows. All participants 148 (100%) affirmed widows home visitation ministry. This was reaffirmed by the findings from the interviews and FGDs. From the interviews, a participant asserted:

We understand the loss of a dear husband is a traumatizing situation. We encourage the membership of the church to spare time to accompany widows in their local church communities (KINF18)).

This was replicated by another participant who informed:

The church does the same way like what the Jerusalem council did in the times of the Apostles. The Apostles paid visits to the widows where they shared with them. The church does the same through the visits which embedded provision of health care, giving material support like shelter, food and sponsoring education for the orphans, providing psycho-socio support including the widows' activities, forming self-help groups to support themselves so that they may not overburden the church (KINF01).

The study found that the SDA church in Itumbe Station is doing very well in accompanying widows through home visits. Home visits were considered by respondents to be helpful to them in a manner of curbing the problem of loneliness, social exclusion, and sometimes marginalization that comes with the loss of their dear husbands as also postulated by Dube(2017). In agreement with the findings, Fleet (2012) who argued that even though friends and family may surround the widow, most widows feel left alone after the death of their spouse and this is why they need support systems that help them to deal with the sad situations life imposes on them. Loneliness and other frustrations coming from bereavement lead one to engage in risky behaviors like prostitution that likewise lead to reduced life expectancy (Vitelli, 2015). House visitations are important in providing social support to widows. This is in tandem with Ozbay et al. (2007) who argued that social support is necessary for sustaining physical and psychological wellbeing and that it is important to have rich and functional social networks that foster effective coping strategies among affected groups.

On self-help church groups, results in 4.5 indicated an overwhelming responses, with all of them (148, 100%) in agreement of the role played by self-help church widow groups



in the lives of the widows. These findings were replicated in the FGDs where a participant had to say:

We young widows are left questioning ourselves whom to share our burdens of life. We have so many questions but very limited answers making us lose the meaning of life. But from the time I joined self-help church group life has totally changed. Through sharing our experiences of life, I realized that I am not alone; there are many others who are going through the same difficulties of life as I do (FGDs50).

Another participant was of the same opinion:

I advise the widows to remain faithful in the church and to Christ who knows all their difficulties. Those who have not formed or joined self-help groups, please, do so. There is a lot to learn from those groups. (FGDs52)

Self-help church groups and initiatives were considered an important church support system that plays a fundamental role in helping widows cope and overcome the challenges that come with the loss of their spouses. The study found that such groups are a medium of mutual exchange of experiences, ideas and even economic difficulties among widows themselves; enable them to cope with their own reality of widowhood, offering them solidarity, comfort and consolation. Sometimes, widows suffer in silence while the church membership continues to assume that since many years have passed after the death of their husbands, the widow has automatically reached acceptance of her situation. But this is not always the case. Self-help church groups are a conducive platform where widows can share their emotional life difficulties, network with other widows so as to share their

sorrows and find solutions in order to inculcate hope and confidence in life. In agreement with Kaori (2007) widows benefit from social support groups since they enable them to be socially active and the exchange of experiences make them resilient to face the challenges of widows. The field findings were in tandem with Beach, et al (2000) who postulated that widows need to change from seeing themselves married to thinking of themselves as widowed, learn to make decisions independently, learn to be alone and make friends and join associations that enable them to be out with people. And also Vitelli (2015) who suggested that in the attempts to get over the hardships of grief and loneliness, widows need to find their own social support systems. This sometimes may point towards the embracement of levirate marriage customs.

Self-help church programs give supportive advice, encouragement and ideas; they give them a greater sense of independence and self-worth. This was affirmed by Kane (2017) who maintained that such social groups empower widows to grow by accepting their current situation, facilitate them to participate in community activities. And Fleet (2012) who contended that even though friends and relatives may well surround the in-care-child widows, most of them still feel left alone after the death of their spouse thereby needing support systems that help them to deal with the sad situations life imposed on them. The support systems encourage widows to accept their situation in faith (Mombo, et al., 2011). While the study by Kaori (2007) had explained that widows benefit from social support groups since they remain socially active and resilient after the death of their spouses.

On the theme of spiritual and professional counselling, the field data was overwhelming with all 148 (100%) participants endorsing it. There was no objection. This overwhelming

response was replicated from the interviews and FGDs. Informant from the interviews posited:

Let the church provide spiritual counseling to the widows so that they may also be full spiritually and above all encourage young widows to re-marry instead of practicing levirate union secretly. Include the widows in the church activities to keep them busy and at the same time maintain them (FGDs53).

The sentiment was echoed by another informant who informed:

The church has programs for the widows for spiritual nourishment and overcome the reality of death of their beloved husbands. Widows being part of the church membership, they benefit from the church's spiritual program – Sabbath worship services, seminars and workshops, counseling, prayer meetings, Bible Study meetings, discipleship classes, and cell church fellowships all meant to boost the faith of believers (KINF20).

While another one confirmed:

She noted that widows usually come for prayer meetings and commit longer hours in prayer and intercession. This is important because their greatest consolation is prayer that helps them to view their suffering from a spiritual dimension for total healing. This allows their grief to be better managed and processed through faith, thereby promoting resilience, transforming grief and loss into an opportunity for a quality and meaningful life (KINF13).

Spiritual counseling enables widows to recount their own story from the perspective of their own experiences. The results from the questionnaire, interviews and FGDs are in agreement with Vitelli (2015), who proposed that the widow would need to obtain their own support, socio-spiritual support, professional counseling, and particularly the application of cognitive behavior therapy to combat negative thinking, in order to overcome sadness and loneliness. The same is reiterated by Asuamah (2012) and Waruta and Kinoti (2002) who asserted that it is the responsibility of the church to offer professional pastoral counseling to widows and exhort the church to empower the widows to become women capable of keeping their own families. In a specific way, a study by Kayode (2011) postulated that the use of professional counselling energizes widows to open up and express themselves emotionally, reaffirming the support of the coping mechanisms to boost self-esteem and autonomy for the restoration quality of life. In agreement with Asuamah (2012), Amaru (2012), and Waruta and Kinoti (2002) counselling of widows should go beyond the material needs of widows. However, the study informs that the church needs to have reliable economic and human resources to support counsellors and psychologists in their service to the widows; effective counselling for widows need strong ecclesial support systems. The study also challenges the development of a ministry of widowhood, where qualified counselling may be provided, and possibly by enhancing the pastoral care ministry, the SDA church membership will be completely engaged.

Continuing with the SDA church's widow psychosocial support systems, the study went further to look into the inclusion of women in the pastoral ministry of the church and the encouragement of widows to remarry. This was done to demystify the misconception that

widows are always there only on the receive side and not to give back to the church membership. The results from the questionnaire are presented in table 7 below

**Table 7: SDA church widow psychosocial support programs**

Item	SD	D	N	A	SA	Total
Inclusion of widows in the pastoral ministry of the church	R-85 %- 57.4	25 16.9	17 11.5	10 6.8	11 7.4	148 100%
Encouragement of widows to remarry	R-30 %- 20.3	32 21.6	36 24.3	20 13. 5	30 20. 3	148 100%

*Key: R – Respondents, %-Percentage*

**Source:** Field Data, 2023

On the inclusion of widows in the ministry of the church, the responses from the field showed that 110 (74.3%) were in disagreement, 17 (11.5%) were undecided, and a minority of 21 (14.2%) were in agreement with the thesis. Those who are in agreement with the thesis that women are included in the ministry of the church had the following:

Widows are always participating in the life of the church. They are involved in Sabbath school for the children, are involved in charity work of the church. These widows follow the example the widow of Dorcas in the Bible who dedicated her life to serve other widows and the orphans (KINF05).

While another participant observed:

It is wrong to conceive of widows as people who only need our material help. They are active members of the church who dedicate their time to visit and console other widows who are going the hardships they underwent. In so doing, they

encourage others who may be thinking that to serve in the church one has to have material things to give.” (KINF17)

However, there were those of a different opinion. For instance, a participant in the FGDs disputed:

I don't consider myself as fully involved in the church. As widows, we are never pictured in the leadership of the church. We are looked always as people who are out to lure men for marriage. This biased misconception pushes us away from the church (FGDs 15).

Echoing this sentiment, another informant asserted:

The involvement of widows in the ministry of the church is only nominal. The practical aspect of what is said is far to be achieved. Widows are looked negatively and many of the church membership do not want to associate themselves with the widows (KINF8).

The findings indicated that widows are not fully engaged in the final ministry of the church even though they may be willing to commit themselves to the evangelism ministry of the church; widows are not given that space in the church. This denies them that fulfillment they could receive from the church and the feeling of being active and beneficial to the church. For example, according to each one's capabilities, some widows can be allocated to take care of orphans and children in the local church community and care for the afflicted in the community (1Tim. 5: 10). By so doing, both widows and the local church community work positively toward the holistic approach of God to humanity because both of them donate themselves positively toward the physical, emotional and spiritual development of the church and the entire community.

On the theme of remarriage as church widow support system, field findings indicated the following – 62 (42.9%) of the respondents disagreed that remarriage can be a widow support system, 36 (24.3%) were undecided and 50 (33.8%) were in agreement that remarriage is a fundamental way advocated by the church curb the problem of widowhood. There were many arguments of those who disagreed on the church's concept of remarriage. Some of those arguments were dealt with in the subsequent objective. In this section, the study chose a few of them. For instance, a participant in the FGDs maintained:

Remarriage is not the only appropriate widow support arrangement in the aspect of marriage arrangement in the cases of death of one partner. In Genesis 38:8-10 God supports and encourages levirate custom. In the case of Onan and his brother's wife Tamar, God commanded him to take up his brother's to bear children for his deceased brother. But he spilt the sperms when he realized that the children to be born would not be his but are of his deceased brother. This annoyed God and killed Onan instead. This is an evidence that the union is accepted by God Himself. Therefore, its purpose is to bear children for the continuity of the family lineage. Why is the church not in support of levirate union when both are supported by God? (FGDs14)

Participants in the interviews informed:

Even though the church teaches and emphasizes the aspect of remarriage, it cannot be used as widow support system since not all widows are not able to remarry for other factors like age. Instead, the church encourages them to remain faithful to the church doctrine and teach their children to love God and obey His

commandments. But in some cases this is not possible. Each and every widow should be given a chance to fulfill their sexual needs. Each should be given a chance to decide whether to practice or not, let the church re-consider this case, she cannot be biased on this issue (FGDs 15).

Another participant in the interviews informed:

There are numerous orphanages for orphans, but non for widows. If the church advocates only remarriage for widows, and does not have resources to take care of the widows, who will take care of those not remarried? The reality of widowhood cannot be handled mere by spiritual aspirations. There are those who think that levirate unions advocate for polygamy and sexual promiscuity, but there are cases where old widows who remained unmarried keep young men in the name of working for them in the fields (KINF13).

The findings are pointing out the inconsistencies and selective application of the Biblical message on marriage in the cases of death of one partner. Despite being a Biblical value, the SDA church considers levirate marriage union immoral and therefore not conforming with Christian marriage teachings perpetuated by the same church even after Christ clearly pronouncing that marriage is an earthly affair (Lk. 20:28-31). The contradiction was clearly manifested by one participant in the interviews who asserted:

I disagree with the levirate union though it is emphasized and allowed in the Old Testament. Let the young widow be freed by the parents' in-law to remarry elsewhere through the church order but not levirate union (KINF15).



The findings are replicated by Bamgbose (2002) who postulated that even though levirate marriage practice is condemned by the church despite having its positive aspects; it continues to be practiced under various customary law systems among the same Christians. The inconsistencies in the church's teachings on this form of marriage points to poor church theology on marriage, lack of proper Biblical interpretation and application of a levirate marriage custom. However, those who were in favor of remarriage maintained:

The widow at first should accept, adjust and bear in mind that Christ is the only protector and shield, incase she's off age, she can decide to remain faithful in her entire life, but if she's young then she can re-marry through the church procedures (FGDs 1-8).

The sentiment was replicated by another participant in the interview scheduled who reasoned:

I could advise the widows to remain faithful in the church for such practices may ruin their lives the co-wife herself will not give her peace of mind, but with the young widows who are left without children, its wise for them to go back to their maternal homes and re-marry so that they may not overburden the church, that is the stand of the church. According to 1timothy 5:14 where Paul advises that let the young widows be free and re-marry so that they may not overburden the church (KINF4-9).

Another informant in the study informed:

The church has done great in reducing the practicing levirate among the Abagusii community by encouraging the young widows to re-marry following the church order and it should be monogamous. Though it will be impossible for the old widows to be re-married. They are to remain faithful to the church doctrine and teach their children to love God and obey His commandments (KINF1)

There were many reactions from both the interview participants and those from the FGDs in favor or disagreement with the Abagusii levirate custom, of which not all could be accommodated in the discussions. The study noted that SDA church widow support systems even though they are more of a social nature and therefore insufficient to cover other aspects, especially the physical ones. However, the notable feature is that support systems encourage the widows to accept their situation in faith (Mombo, et al., 2011). When the church does not properly take care of the widows the fundamental questions are: what would be other options? What relationship does a Christian widow have with her deceased husband's family? Why not be open to examine other systems that meet the same goals proclaimed by the church? In addressing these questions, the study findings demonstrate that there are many unrealistic expectations of the church on widows that fail to address their actual reality. The complex multifaceted reality of widowhood calls for diverse and complementary efforts to ensure that widows in the SDA church are well attended to. Given the complexity of the world it will be wrong to think that solutions facing widows in the church only come from church pronouncements.

There is a need for combined efforts, including Abagusii cultural measures so long as those measures or practices help to positively address the plight of widows. It would be

inappropriate to think that the Abagusii cultural marriage customs are always against the church teaching and tradition (Manala, 2015). This is where the clergy and theologians have a greater role to investigate the value of culture on marriage in different cultural communities; they are responsible for promoting acceptance and understanding of culture as an aspect of positive life. Supported by Manala (2015), the study noted that many in the church fail to be specific in giving widows the help they need in a way of adapting into their new life without forgetting their old one of marriage at the time when they were together with their real spouses.

#### **4.3.3 Factors influencing the practice of levirate custom among the Abagusii in Itumbe Station**

After discussing the findings on the teachings of the church on marriage and levirate unions, and also church widow support systems, which were found to be inadequate, the study further went ahead to discuss Abagusii levirate custom. It did that under the argument that the SDA church condemns the Abagusii levirate custom yet it does not have enough resources to fully care for the widows and their children; furthermore, the church appears not have convincing Biblical and pastoral reasons to warrant the condemnation of levirate custom; instead, the church has weak arguments against the embracement of Abagusii levirate custom; the church makes spiritual exaltations that that are far from the context of the local church community that is entangled between two realities that all look for solutions affecting widows.

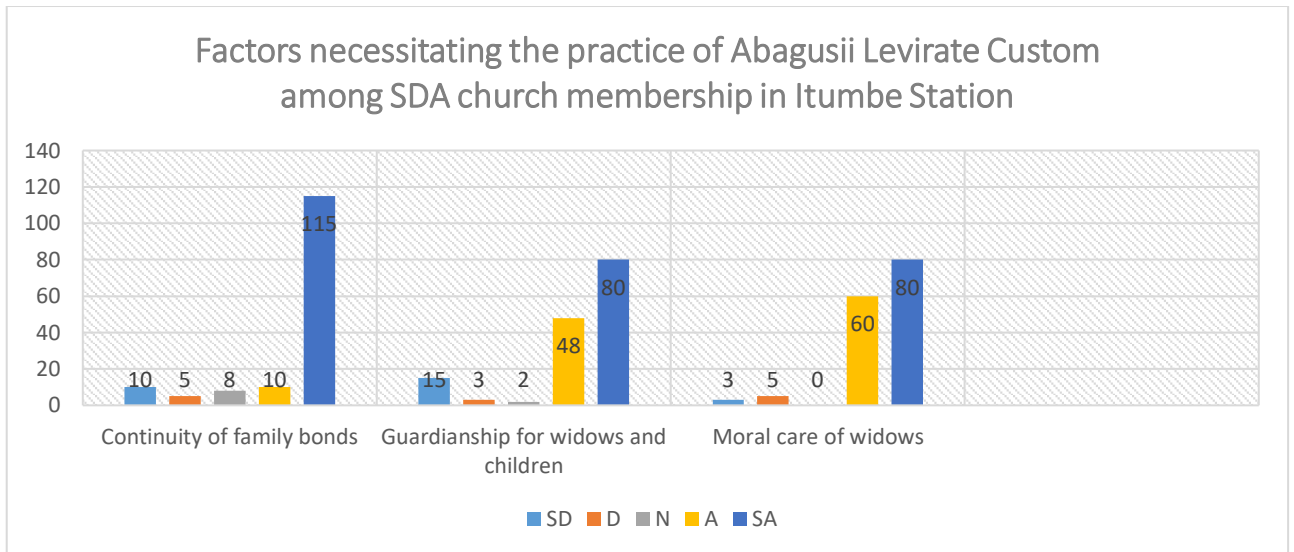
The Abagusii practice of levirate custom is grounded on the fact that many widows face serious hardships after the death of their beloved spouses, which lowers or affects her

dignity. They lose material base, friends, family, peace of mind, and other securities; their support systems diminish extensively, exposing them to other social vices like prostitution and undignified jobs in their attempts to respond to their individual and children unmet needs, which correspondingly affect them and their children.

These assertions are supported by Weisberg (2011) who observed that levirate practice is taken to fill the genuine gaps left by their deceased spouses taking into account that the custom is not imposed on the widow but rather she has the freedom to decide whom to stay with among the brothers and cousins of the deceased husband. Just like other societies that practice levirate custom, the Abagusii custom, the widow enters levirate union with the guarantee that her dignity is respected and guarded by the family of the husband, which is her new family after that of her real parents where she was born.

In the preceding subsection, it was observed that the SDA church does not have a clear pastoral program that caters for the needs of the widows. Given that the widows are not fully attended by the church, the Abagusii levirate marriage custom fills some of the pastoral gaps left by the SDA church in Itumbe Station. On this, the study focused on five key aspects: continuity of family bonds, guardianship for the widow and children, moral care or widows, promotion of community wellbeing, and emotional support of the widow. They are Abagusii traditional community widow support systems under the umbrella of levirate custom that catered for the overall wellbeing of the widow. The discussion on these themes of Abagusii levirate custom was facilitated by asking the respondents to express their perceptions, views, feelings and regard to the relevance of levirate practice among the Abagusii Christian community in Itumbe Station facilitated by the Likert scale approach, represented regressively by numbers 5 – 1, with where SD

– Strongly agree, D – Disagree, N – Neutral, A – Agree, and SA – Strongly agree. The results were as displayed in figure 9 below.



**Figure 9: Factors necessitating the practice of Abagusii Levirate Custom among SDA church membership in Itumbe Station**

**Source:**Field Data, 2023

The field questionnaire results presented in figure9 show that on the theme of continuity of family bonds, 15 (10.1%) of the respondents disagreed with the thesis, 8 (5.4%) were neutral, and a majority of 125 (85.5%) of the respondents affirmed the thesis. These findings support the fact that the Abagusii levirate custom gains support from the members of the SDA Christian community. The sentiments from the questionnaire were equally replicated by those from the interviews and FGDs. For instance, a participant in the interview schedules informed:

After the death of the husband, usually there comes confusion on how to start a new life, coping with life without a husband, and what will become of the family

of the deceased man. But the Gusii culture takes care of this situation. The entire family of the deceased man stays alone and starts preparations for a suitable husband who can maintain the family of the deceased until the children fully grow up. If he did not have children, especially a son, the brother in-law has the obligation to have children for his deceased brother. The children born of the levirate considered legitimate children of the deceased brother (KINF 20).

The sentiments were replicated by another participant who posited:

The culture supports Levirate unions with proper and accepted norms that were to safeguard the deceased man; practically there is nothing wrong with levirate union since the community is after the continuity of the deceased's lineage and to make sure the family of the deceased has grown well without problems of abandonment. This is something that those influenced by the western European mentality have condemned, include the church that is expected to be accommodative of the cultures of those it has evangelized (KINF23).

The empirical literature from the field explain that according to the Abagusii culture, the community believes that having an heir to look after the deceased man's property cannot be compromised. As a result, if a married man died without children, particularly male children, his family would expect his widow to marry someone in the family, typically a brother of the deceased, in order to ensure that the deceased's line would continue. This is the most church contested aspect of levirate practice. However, for the Abagusii community, the practice is aimed at optimizing the widow's fertility potential and

reproductive mission, particularly the young widows to go on having children in the name of the deceased husband.

Therefore, through levirate arrangement, the widow cannot divorce herself from the deceased husband's family and remarry outside of the family. She is to maintain her role and authority as a legal wife within the family of her deceased husband, while the levir makes it possible for the children and their mother to continue living in their true home, saving them the trouble of seeking a new family in a different family arrangement. The widow continues in the lineage of the dead husband as an active and functioning legal wife.

The findings were found to be consistent with Afolayan (2004) who argued that the death of the man or husband need not put an end to the procured marriage; according to him, the widow may remain in her deceased husband's homestead where she is regularly supported by the levir, or she may move to the levir's homestead as a legal wife according to the customary law. This sentiment was earlier own asserted by Maillu (1988) who informed that levirate union enables the widow and children to continue staying at the deceased's cultural legal home known to her and the children left to her. While according to Kathide (2007), even though the levir might not engage in conjugal relations with his deceased brother's wife, he must nevertheless continue to care for the family in the best ways possible as a way to please his brother among the living dead; ensure that resources are correctly used to benefit his entire family, including that of his deceased brother (Owinio, 2000. It was, therefore, extremely important that there should be a male person in the form of a levir or heir in the family. However, supported by the theoretical literature, the deep seated issue and point to note in the findings is that despite the church's

attempts to discourage levirate practice among its membership, the custom is still revered among the people who profess the Christian faith and beliefs.

#### Guardianship for the Widow and Children:

On the theme of guardianship for the widow and the children left to her by the deceased husband the findings from the questionnaire showed that 18 (12.2%) were in disagreement that levirate custom among the Abagusii is done for guardianship purposes.

Participant in the interviews asserted:

The practice is considered as outdated and primitive. The Bible puts it clear in 1timothy 5:14 that let the young widows be free and re-marry so that they may not overburden the church (KINF 20).

This view is supported by Owino (2000) who holds that today good moral behavior among the young men has eroded, they have become irresponsible such that many young men leave the widows of their diseased kinsmen unguarded. This subjects such widows to the cruel hands of strangers who veil themselves behind guardianship to loot the properties of the deceased man leaving the widow and her children in miserable poverty. And also by Omen (2001) who relooked the fact that men who take part in the practice as guardians do so with an ill motive of acquiring material resources such as land, money and money left to the widow by her deceased spouse and also the lust to enjoy sexual intimacy with the widow. However, those who hold the view against levirate custom for guardianship of the widow and her children, and being relatively a minority could not invalidate the practice of levirate custom even though they argue that widow guardianship is a primitive thing used to rob widows of their property which has now been overtaken by time hence insignificant.



The results also showed that 2 (1.4%) of the respondents were neutral on the issue of guardianship, while 128 (86.5%) a majority were in agreement that the Abagusii levirate custom is for taking care of the widow and her children. This overwhelming response among the SDA Christian faithful in Itumbe Station is communicative of the positive regard to the custom among the members of church and also of the Abagusii traditional community. The questionnaire findings were replicated by those from the interviews and FGDs. For instance, a participant in the FGDs had to say:

Levirate union provides guardianship for the widow and her children. When the levir is within the family everything runs smoothly because even the intruders will fear to come either steal or take any property by force; something that tends to happen when there is no adult male in the home (FGDs 32).

The concern was raised in the interviews by a participant who narrated her story:

I accepted levirate union because my husband died when I was barely twenty-two years leaving me with the little children to take care of with no meaningful work. The levir, who is my brother in-law took up the responsibility of guardianship and helped me to bring up my children; a responsibility that I couldn't take up alone (FGD 44).

The sentiments were succinctly replicated by another in the interviews who informed:

Levirate custom is practiced among the Abagusii people since it offers security to the widow and her children. Widows are vulnerable people who need constant guardianship; physically they are vulnerable and cannot defend themselves

against any attack. When there is a levir this physical security is guaranteed (KINF14).

The data showed that the Abagusii community attaches great importance to widow guardianship. These proponents of the practice of levirate custom argue that widow guardianship is of supreme importance and cannot be washed away by modern trends life – Christianity, Western lifestyles and modern laws. The significance of the practice ranges from socio- economic to psychological aspects. The findings are in tandem with Ngore (2012) and Wanjiku (1997) who explained that when a man dies and leaves his family behind, the levir takes up the responsibility of providing basic services and protects the widow and her children from any forms of threats. This is also reiterated by Gunga (2009) who succinctly points out that it was the responsibility of the brother to take care the widow of his deceased brother and children so as to provide for them the necessities of life; the levir to serve as a guardian to the widow must be a kinsman of the dead. It is through the kinship system that the widow guardians were identified and given the customary responsibility to guard and protect the widow; levirate union is given considerable attention because it provided social capital and safety for widows (Gneezy et al., 2016). In agreement with all other studies, the levirate custom practiced by many African societies is grounded on ‘Ubuntu’ principle of thought and life which emphasizes on communality, mutual respect, love and caring especially for the vulnerable groups such as the widows, orphans and marginalized in the society (Manala, 2015).

Widow guardianship is carried out to provide help and love care for the widows and their children, and therefore should not be construed to mean a structured custom designed to dehumanize widows or impoverish and oppress them nor is it part of the so called male

chauvinism (Tosie, 2008). Just like any other marriage arrangements, including monogamous church marriages, widow guardianship does not miss to have its failures especially from those who may want to take advantage of the loopholes in culture to exploit it. It is indubitable that today levirate custom as a cultural practice has drifted from its original intentions such that what is seen witnessed in some cases is merely an abuse of what was once a noble practice; this is done to the extent that some individuals in the name of guardianship take advantage of the custom to rob the widows the family wealth left by her late husband leaving her in a state of unimaginable poverty. However, such abuses are not a justification not to dig deep into the values enshrined within the Abagusii levirate custom.

On the theme of moral care of widows, the FGDs and interviews sessions were centered on the sexual aspect of the widows. The quantitative data and results in table 4.7 showed that 8 (5.4%) informants were in disagreement that the Abagusii levirate custom takes moral care of the widows. The findings from the interviews supported this view. For instance, a participant had to say:

No, this is a past/outdated culture with very many negative repercussions like transmission of diseases, promoting immorality among others; its main reason is nothing else other than sexual intimacy. This is why the church does not accept this practice among her membership (KINF 26).

While a majority of 140 (94.6%) were in support of the thesis and were of a different opinion. For instance, a participant in the interviews affirmed:

Sexuality of widows in the church is taken as a taboo, whereby widows are felt should not have sexual desires or needs whatsoever, or that the sexuality is so

rapacious that it must be stringently controlled. The widows in the church have limited or no choices to make relating to their sexual life, except remarriage, but not all are able to remarry. Consequently, widows in the church suffer in silence in the church (KINF 02).

Widows are also human beings who need some intimacy and sexual affection; they cannot be on their own. After the death of the husband many widows start loitering looking for somebody who could intimately meet the role of their deceased husbands. Levirate union gives the widow another chance to fulfill her sexual needs under the customary law provided by the levir. The union was meant for provision of moral care for the widow and the children mitigate the feelings of rejection, and to avoid temptations of one getting married elsewhere to fulfill her conjugal rights (KINF 10).

Another participant narrated a story of a middle age widow, a member of the church saying:

I know of a church member, a widow who is economically put, capable of responding to her material needs. But she is known to have a very young man under thirty years of age in the name of a worker, a herd's boy helping her with homework (KINF 01).

In the findings, the study established that even though there were divergent views, Abagusii levirate custom helps to maintain moral integrity of the widow by minimizing sexual immorality. Sexually active widows engage in levirate custom with her in-laws so as to bar her from indulging in indiscriminate sex with other men. The custom put the

widow in checks and stopped her in engaging in promiscuity with strangers. Resonating with the findings, Platteau, et al (2012) claimed that in situations of prostitution levirate marriage institutes a better option; unmarried widow influenced by her widowhood settings may easily fall prey to prostitution and other indiscriminate sexual relations with other men. To cure this, the custom ensures sexual integrity and satisfaction to the widow, particularly the younger ones. The findings were also in agreement with Abong'o Ngore (2014) opined that levirate custom aids in upholding moral integrity of the widow by abating sexual immorality in the traditional Luo society since sexually active widows are required to have a levir approved by the family and community as a sexual partner (brother in-laws) to meet the widow's affective needs.

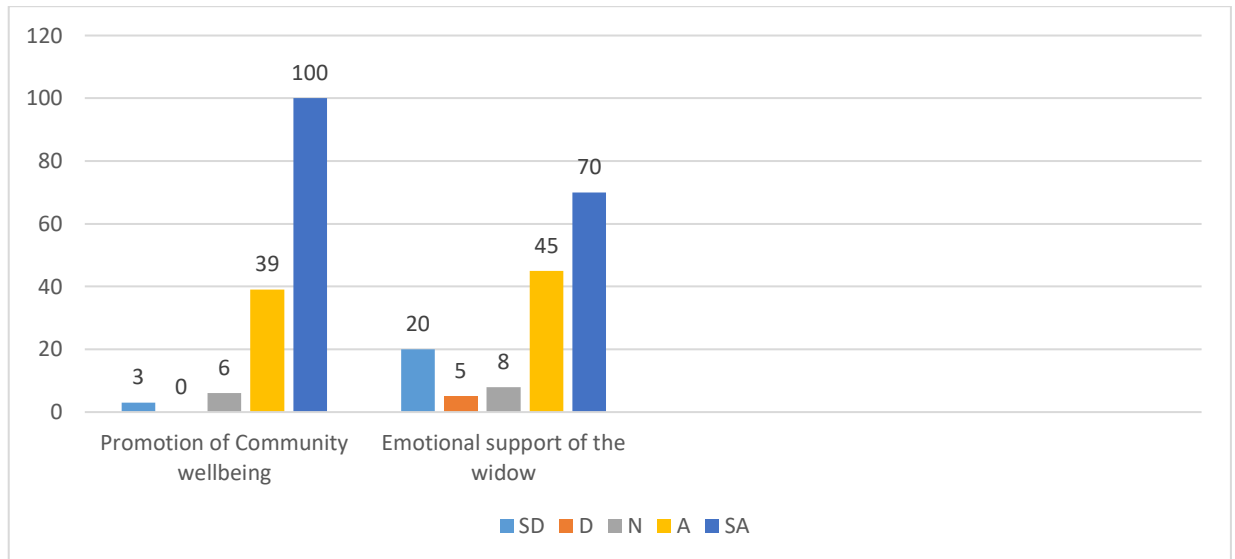
From the above findings, the study established that sex is an important part of Abagusii life since it entailed other factors like procreation and the widow's sex emotional development. The findings are supported by the Holy Scriptures, especially by Isaiah 4: 1 which says: 'seven women will take hold of one man, in that day, and say we will eat our own bread and wear our own clothing, only let us be called by your name, and cover the shame of our nakedness'. The text literally is in support of levirate union and polygamous marriage arrangements. In most cases, traditional church responses to widowhood are mistakenly envisioned to draw a borderline over her sexuality and transform her into a non-sexual being.

Church traditional inhibitions hold that either widows should not have sexual desires or needs whatsoever outside the context of remarriage, or that their sexuality must be stringently controlled as in the case of the doctrine of remaining single the rest of her life, dedicated to prayer and intercessions; the fate of sexual desire for windows is a long

sealed taboo that the church runs away from. The study established that in the SDA church, widows' sexuality is perceived as something that must be monitored. The postulation is that widows since they do not have legal and church determined husbands are regarded as desperate to find new men and would use all available tricks to do so (Okonda, 2018).

In the finding, the SDA church assumes that the religious faith makes widows asexual as they age, and they indoctrinated to equate their sexual expressions with temptation and sin. Yet the denial of widows' sexual intimacy can have horrendous consequences such as having clandestine sexual relationships that can lead to other serious outcomes like diseases, child bearing without a father figure, and even abortions in the attempts to hide the guilt and avoid mockery from the church membership. These are practical issues that the church does not want to address. The plight of widows in general and particularly that which relates to their sexuality has often been overlooked and caged only within the umbrella of remarriage and remaining unmarried. Based on the field findings and supported by Shisanya (2007), the study discloses that sexual intimacy was a major aspect of the levir. However, it was not mandatory in all cases, especially when the widow was at her old age or sunset years. Widows living without men to take up the duty as heads of households became easy targets for sexual innuendo and sexual assault.

The study went further to discuss other aspects that necessitate the practice of Abagusii levirate custom among SDA community. The results are as displayed in figure10 below.



**Figure 10: Aspects that necessitate the practice of Abagusii levirate custom among SDA community**

**Source:**Field Data, 2023

On the theme of promotion of Community well-being, the results in figure 10 demonstrated that 3 (2.0%) were in agreement that Abagusii levirate custom promotes community well-being, 6 (4.1%) were undecided, and 139 (93.9%), which were a majority in support of the thesis.

According to the Gusii culture, marriage continues even after the death of a spouse, the wife is still bound by the community marriage ties. This is because, the widow is not just married to deceased husband but more importantly to the community. This is one of the deceased’s brother takes up the responsibility to sire the children not just for the deceased, but also for the community. This is applicable if the widow left behind is young and without a child. Whereas the church advocates for re-marriage and now a question stands as to who will marry the widow? (KINF17-23)

The findings are not in agreement with Dube (2019) who makes a general statement that when a woman becomes a widow, immediately there is an unbalanced power structure between the community members and the widow, because of cultural beliefs relating to widowhood. And that the perceptions of community members of perceiving widows with suspicion, that they may be involved in the death of their husbands, and also the perception that a widow is of a lower status than a married woman, may leave widows feeling isolated and rejected in the community (Dube 2016). In the Abagusii community, this is not always the case; the widow is fully involved in community activities since she always need social support from the community members and families to assist her during the journey of widowhood which also can mitigate the experiencing of the effects of stressors (Anusic& Lucas 2013).The family and the community cannot afford to lose their children by allowing them go away with their mother to another home. The Abagusii community use levirate custom as a means to retain the widow in the family and community of the deceased husband, and prevent her from taking her children back to her parents' home or to someone else where they do not belong. Both the quantitative questionnaire findings and the qualitative findings are in tandem with Shorter (1975) who argued that levirate practice is intended to keep in touch the two families (the family of the woman and her husband), which give children a sense of blood belonging to their deceased father, relatives and community. Under this, the widow and the children authoritatively stay in their homestead where the children live with their mother, levir and other uncles. It is the community that determines and life of the widow and children and they are fulfilled in the community of the deceased man.

Finally, the study discussed and presented the results on the emotional support of the widow: The findings showed an overwhelming support of the thesis 115 (77.7%)



respondents affirming that levirate custom of the Abagusii community goes beyond sexual intimacy to giving emotional support to the widow and her children. 8 (5.4%) of the respondents were undecided on the proposed thesis, while 25 (16.9%) respondents were in disagreement demonstrating that levirate custom does not provide emotional support to the widow. A majority of the participants in the FGDs maintained:

With the death of their beloved husbands, widows are broken hearted persons; they face innumerable challenges, which include discriminatory regards, isolation, and poor access to basic services like healthcare, material poverty, psychosocial trauma, demoralization, fearfulness, emptiness, helplessness and abandonment to loneliness. All these challenges weigh them down in need of emotional support. This reality is not just about material and quantifiable things or of any emotional need that can be filled by anybody. Rather also need personal emotional need that has nothing to do with sexual intimacy (FGDs 10, 17, 23, 34).

As widows, we are at the crossroad because the church is pushing us to re-marry which is too difficult. We cannot leave our matrimonial homes for remarriage because we have done a lot of development and we need to be with our children who also need our presence and maternal love in the context of their deceased father (FGDs 57).

The findings are consistent with Zaedi (2006) who asserted that widowhood entails emotional loss and change in lifestyle, identity, social status and roles that can only be filled by the levir. Despite this, there were divergent views from both the questionnaire and the interview schedules. This divergent view was represented by 25 (16.9%) participants and reiterated by a participant in the interview schedule who argued:

Although levirate union may be important for coping with bereavement, support from family and friends plays a greater role in the emotional life of the widows. Closeness of friends and family members, together with the Christian community has more emotional ramifications to the widow than what the levir can offer (KINF 15).

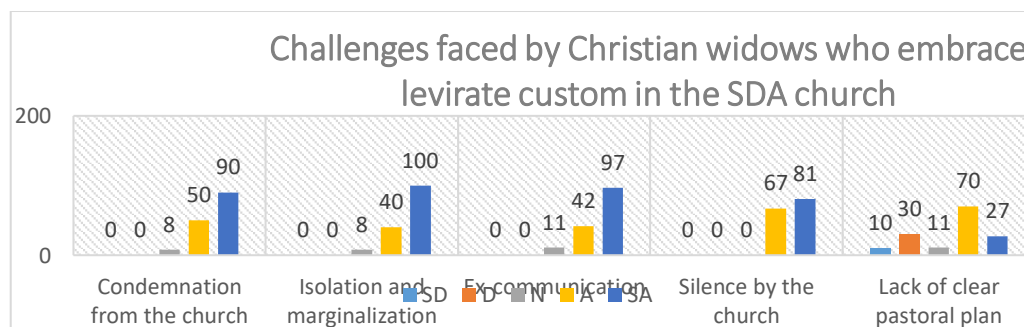
It is true that social, economic and emotional support should be provided by the family members, community and society at large to enable the victim cope with the change of life. However, in agreement with De Jong Gierveld (2002) the study argued that spouses tend to be the best sources of long-term emotional support. Spousal relationships provide profound proximity between individuals, interpersonal commitment, and shared interests that define companionship and ensure the exchange of support. This cannot be given by anybody else other than the levir who lives in a marriage relationship with the widow. On this Makato et al, (2008) notes that some people continue to observe levirate practice not out of cultural obligation but rather on the belief that it possesses therapeutic value that helps the widow to move on with life after losing her beloved husband. Such therapy may be more effective for a mourning widow than professional advice (Nowye, 2005; Connidis, 2010)

#### **4.3.4 Challenges facing widows who have embraced Levirate custom in Itumbe Station**

The study was cognizant of the reality that there are possible challenges faced by widows who have embraced levirate marriage custom despite being members of the SDA church in Itumbe Station, South Kenya Conference. The claim is consistent with the study by

Owen (2010) which postulated that widows are being excluded in many areas of their lives, including socio-religious aspects. In the establishment and discussion of the possible challenges, the respondents were asked to express their perceptions, views, feelings and regard to the challenges facing levirate practice among Christian widows in selected Seventh Day Adventist churches in Itumbe Station, South Kenya Conference. As was done with other section, the discussion on the views was facilitated by the Likert scale approach centered on poor care of the widows, condemnation from the church, isolation and marginalization from the Christian community, ex-communication from the church, silence form the church on the plight of widows, stigmatization, abandonment, anger and emphasis on remarriage or remaining single which is not practical. The results were as displayed in figure 11 below.

**Figure 11: Challenges faced by Christian widows who embrace levirate custom in the SDA church**



**Source:** Field data, 2023

The results in figure 11 indicated that on the theme of pastoral plan to address the issues of widows in the SDA church in Itumbe Station, 40 (27%) respondents did not agree with the postulate that the church does not have clear pastoral plan. This quantitative field data was supported by participants in the interviews who reiterated:

The church has programs for the widows for spiritual nourishment. For instance, occasionally there are women congresses that are organized by the church. There are also church seminars meant to boost the faith of all believers (KINF P2).

The church has support systems/programs for widows that provide widows health services, food and clothing. However, the church cannot do everything for the widows (KINF P3).

However, despite those (participants) 11 (7.4%) who were neutral, a majority 97 (65.5%) were of a different view. For instance, a participant in the interview in a suggestive manner said:

They need to have official nominated committee comprised of widows with special programs which keep them busy. These programs should be chaired by the widows with a Church Elder as their adviser and if possible be funded by the church and well-wishers (KINF 46).

Other participants asserted:

Losing a husband is a guarantee of lifetime poverty. Christian widows in Itumbe Station, South Kenya Conference find themselves laboring 10 to 12 hours a day in fields owned by others just to earn a meager income. We younger Christian widows with children at home find life even more difficult, the church does not even know how many we are; we are the poorest of the poor in the region (FGDs 9).

When my husband died, I have experienced so many problems ranging from material loss to immaterial needs. I went through trauma and whenever I went to a church minister, am always told present your problems to God who gives everything. Members of the church who come to accompany me only come to pray in my house and go. In our local churches there are no counseling offices where as widows we can go and receive structured help (FGDs 47).

From the findings, the study found that the SDA church in Itumbe Station does not have a properly structured pastoral plan for the widows to prioritize their needs. It is true that widows are supported materially, but it is all on voluntary grounds of the church membership, which was not enough to fully cater for the widows in the church. The widows are not enrolled and therefore in the case of help, the church does not even know the neediest widows (1 Timothy 5:9). Not enrolling the widows, meant that church cannot account for the support given to the widows hence not able to empower them.

Pastoral caregivers, especially the voluntary ones fail to understand what they should do except prayer because they not have adequate knowledge of spiritual and psychological counseling hence not able to benefit widows satisfactorily. These widow pastoral caregivers are not trained on how to support women who have lost their partners, nor are they shown how to confront situations and practices that discriminate against widows (Kapuma, 2011). The study noted that the church community's primary responsibility is to honor real widows through admonitions, which include not only respect but also material support to provide for them demonstrate genuine regard, sympathy, and recognition of their service and their personal dignity. There also arose the problem of role models in the pastoral care of the widows in the church.

Those who are charged with the responsibility and the calling to inspire change of attitude towards the widows have taken advantage of the condition of the widows and drifted to do other unacceptable things. For instance, a participant in the FGDs narrated her own story saying:

The church condemns the practice of levirate custom, but those given the pastoral responsibility of the widows do not perform it as expected; they take advantage of the widows. Some widows have been cohabited by some of the church clergies. With my case I have one, whenever we want to “do it”, for fear of scandals we go far away from home where we are not known. I am sure there are other widows who do the same but they cannot come out and say that they are cohabited by the very people supposed to care for them because they fear stigmatization, marginalization/isolation from the rest of the believers and even excommunicated from the church (FGDs 41).

This finding is indicative of the contradictions in the church that vehemently and openly condemns levirate unions but encourages the behavior of cohabitation among the widows. With such situation and experiences in the church, the study found that most helpless widows in the SDA church in Itumbe Station have no alternative than to opt for levirate custom to get family levir willing to accept them and their children to avoid going through frustrations in the church that supposed to care for them.

The results in figure 11 above indicated that none of those answering the questionnaire was in disagreement of the fact that women who embrace levirate custom undergo condemnation from the church. Only 8 (5.4%) participants were neutral, while the majority 140 (94.6%) of the respondents were in agreement that the SDA church condemns those widows who are in levirate union relationships. These questionnaire

findings were supported by those from the interviews and FGDs where some of the participants asserted:

We practice levirate custom privately for fear of church condemnation because the church views the practice as an act of polygamy that cannot be accepted in the Christian church that emphasizes on monogamous marriages through the church procedure where the two must openly wed (FGDs 51).

Many of the widows we support have been sent out of their church membership and families because of their decision to embrace Abagusii levirate custom instead of following the church teachings. These widows have no one to help them (KINF 23).

The field findings are consistent with Usha (2011) who postulated that in Holland nearly every Christian community has structures that are supported through the offerings of the members; however, within those structures still church widows are sometimes subjected into various kinds of sufferings and mistreatment. But then, the situation of the widows puts into question the very principles of the Christian message preached by the SDA church. For instance, the parable of the Samaritan is the best scriptural text to consider in this discussion on condemnation of widows in the SDA church. The Samaritan's attitude and act to meet the needy person followed the neglect shown by the Levite and a priest who are religious and church officials (Luke 10:25–37, Matt 22:34–40, Mark 12:28–34). Jesus narrated this parable in reaction to a question posed to him about who to regard as a neighbor (Luke 10:25). However, in the context of the findings of this study question could be: Is it the church that condemns, isolates, stigmatizes the widows or the levir that accepts and cares for them? Jesus taught zero discrimination, and at the end of the parable,

Jesus commanded, “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37). This is what the SDA church is challenged to do and entrench in her attitude and regard to widows who opt for levirate relationships.

On the theme of ex-communication, the results in figure 11 indicated that none of those who answered the questionnaire disagreed with the thesis that widows who embrace levirate custom experience ex-communication from the church. Only 11 (7.4%) participants were neutral, while the majority 139(93.9%) respondents were in agreement that the SDA church ex-communicates from the church those widows who are in levirate union relationships. The sentiments in the quantitative findings are fully echoed by those from the FGDs and interviews. For instance, some participants informed the following:

Whenever a widow is found to have been re-married through levirate union, she is ex-communicated. With this case many who cannot withstand ex-communication from the church membership opt to practice it secretly. To those who practice it openly are ex-communicated from the church and a good number of them opt to join other denominations which are less rigid while others decide to be re-baptized and come back to the SDA church membership (KINF 07).

The church is unfair because in creation story man and women are believed to be stay together as a marriage union. As a family life leader, there are many issues brought to me to solve concerning levirate unions, sometimes I sympathize with the young widows because they are very tender and cannot cope with life alone. It becomes difficult for me to judge them because there is no law in the Bible or in the church manual that guarantee any judgment. As a church elder, I find myself



at the crossroad on whether to recommend them for ex-communication or censure them (KINF 29).

Through the threats and action of ex-communication of members engaged in levirate unions, the church is losing more members because it does permit its practice within its membership. At the same time, widows who are good church members and wish to remain within the confines of church teachings on levirate custom are tied by the Abagusii culture which cannot allow them to move from her marital home and be re-married elsewhere, except to accept the custom. This situation puts widows at the crossroad even though others privately chose to remain in the church membership for fear of being ex-communicated (KINF17).

The presented data showed the hardships widows go through in the SDA church in Itumbe Station, South Kenya Conference. The rigid stance of the church was seen to frustrate any efforts towards authentic pastoral care of widows. Former friends avoided widows and others disappeared. Widows in levirate unions are discriminated against and divorced from the church membership.

The study went further to discuss the theme of isolation and marginalization by the SDA church of widows who engage in levirate marriage. The results in figure 11 above indicated that none of those who answered the questionnaire disagreed with the thesis that widows who embrace levirate custom experience ex-communication from the church. Only 8 (5.4%) participants were neutral, while the majority 140 (94.6%) respondents were in agreement that the SDA church isolates and marginalizes those who practice the Abagusii levirate custom.

No because this practice is considered as polygamy which is not accepted in any Christian church. Those who practice it openly are condemned, isolated and marginalized from the Christian faith and face censorship and others are ex-communicated from the church and denied rendering services in the church (KINF 34).

Anybody found engaging in levirate union is censured, ex-communicated from the church services, abandoned, isolated and even marginalized. Once the person is censured she/he not supposed to give any comment, questioning or taking of the sacraments. A good number of those who have been ex-communicated have joined other denominations that are less rigid leading to the loss of the church members instead of gaining members for the Lord's kingdom (FGDs 15).

The findings demonstrated widows' subordination in the SDA church, which makes them feel the loss of personal contract and human association leaving them with the only alternative to withdraw and become unresponsive to the church and her activities. But then this makes them lose a very important aspect of church psychosocial widow support system that was discussed in objective two of this study. However, the profound effect of this is to have a negative appreciation of themselves and the church as a social institution; it deprives them of a faith based living environment and of a psychosocial encouraging and consoling community ministry and coping mechanism.

Attached to excommunication is the theme of isolation. The field findings showed that none of the respondents disagreed with the postulate that the church isolates widows in

levirate unions, 8 (5.4%) were neutral and 140 (94.6%) were in agreement with the postulate. This resonated with the qualitative findings where participants informed:

We are marginalized and isolated in matters of church pastoral ministry and service; every church department is supposed to be allocated with three Sabbaths to carry out their programs as from morning to evening, but with us widows we are allocated minimum services, which is not enough for us to put our energies into service for the church. While those who are in levirate union are not even supposed to perform any function in the church even when they are prepared and willing to offer their services (FGDs 14).

Why should we feel neglected and isolated by the very church we have always esteemed and grown up in? We are not needed simply because we have engaged ourselves in levirate custom that gives us support that the church could not holistically give. Because of this, nobody in the church cares about our dignity as humans and people born in faith within the SDA church (FGDs 55).

The findings revealed that the isolation of widows who are in levirate union comes in different forms where they are left disengaged in social and church interactions and events. This culminates through excommunication because of accepting the Abagusii levirate custom results in stress and sense of rejection from the church, leaving them with no alternative to grow in the faith. This has profound ramifications such that the SDA church is considered not for those considered to be “sinners”, but rather for the “upright”. Such women lose self-esteem, worth and dignity and find it difficult to mingle with other members of the church. They lose friends in the faith who are also suspicious about the “perceived regard” to their marriage option of levirate union. The field findings are

supported by Angela Tembo (2012) who in his study found that widows among them were socially isolated because of their status and options in life. The SDA church in Itumbe Station should welcome widows who have embraced levirate custom to let them participate in all church activities. By so doing, she learns to empower and help them to live independent lives beyond financial needs. Consequently, widows would be able to concentrate on their ministerial duties in order for them to improve their emotional, physical and spiritual life and that of the of the church membership

On the theme of silence of the SDA church on the plight of those who accepted levirate custom, the results in figure 4.10 above indicated that none of those who answered the questionnaire disagreed with the thesis that widows who embrace levirate custom experience silence from the church, and none of the participants were neutral. Instead, all respondents 148 (100%) were in agreement that widows who are in levirate unions experience or silence indifference from the church; their issues are never part of the church concern.

Once a church member has customarily opted for levirate union and is excommunicated from the church membership, the SDA church doesn't speak of their plight anymore. They are taken as if they never meant anything in the life of the church when they were active members (KINF 28).

The church has no any plan to involve those who have opted for levirate union. But this practice is in the Holy Scriptures that the SDA church has committed herself to propagate. By keeping silent the church does not have any modalities to exploit the potential of these widows who are now remarried within the home of their deceased husbands (KINF 42).

The situation of silence on the plight of widows who opt for whichever way of life is stressed in the study by Chauke (2003) who observed that churches in Zimbabwe take a detached stance in the reality of widows who are supposed to take care of the children left to them with their deceased spouses. Bellamy (2005) also asserted that the silence and inaction from the Christian community that surrounds widowhood for proper care of themselves and their children is morally wrong and unacceptable. While Bouwers (in Kretzschmar et al 2009) sustained that if the church remains silent then it means she is complicit in acts of injustice, abdicating her responsibility to speak for the helpless and uphold their dignity. But when they are neglected then are not able to suffer within the church and in the larger church membership (Miruka et al., 2015). Bouwers (2009) further adds that the most basic way in which the church involve herself in assisting the orphan and widow is by taking up concrete duties for these groups at a local church –having organized church based initiatives like offering shelters, have support groups, home based care, encouraging volunteers to get involved in a real and practical way that will alleviate pain and suffering. Such church initiatives cover the basic needs of widows and lessen other forms of widow care that are not consistent with the church values. In their absence, then the church loses any moral and religious authority to denounce any form of widow care (levirate and polygamy).

The study further went to discuss other challenges (stigmatization, abandonment, anger and remarriage) of widows who opt for the Abagusii levirate custom in the SDA church in Itumbe Station, South Kenya Conference. The results were as illustrated in table 8 below.

**Table 8: Challenges faced by widows that embrace the Abagusii levirate custom**

Item	SD	D	N	A	SA	Total
Stigmatization	R-00 %-0.0	00 0.0	00 0.0	28 18.9	120 81.1	148 100%
Abandonment	R-00 %-0.0	00 0.0	08 5.4	10 6.8	130 87.8	148 100%
Anger	R-20 %-2.7	16 10.8	25 16.9	16 10.8	71 48.0	148 100%
Remarriage is the second major problem of the widow.	R-10 %-6.8	15 10.1	8 5.4	60 40.5	55 37.2	148 100%

*Key: R – Respondents, %-Percentage*

**Source:** Researcher’s Construct, 2023

On stigmatization in the church, the findings in table 4.10 reveal that all participants 148 (100%) who answered the questionnaire were of the position that widows who engage in levirate marriage are stigmatized by the church membership. This quantitative finding from the questionnaire was confirmed by the qualitative verbatim responses from the interviews and FGDs as indicated below:

The church is undecided to appoint or elect us widows to leadership or assign us some duties. Whenever there is a chance for any responsibility to be done, the church does it with a lot of caution because it thinks that in the event that we the (widows) are overtaken by desires and remarries or engages in any sexual activity, the church is put in disgrace (FGDs 11).

The findings were in agreements with Onyancha (2014) who argued that it is not only those widows lose their husbands, but widowhood state of being robs them of their status and condemns them to the brims of society where they suffer life-threatening forms of

discrimination, stigma and deprivation. While the church appears to be in defense of widows by putting protection measures to prevent certain practices perceived not acceptable, the same church isolates them instead of being accommodative.

Having discussed the themes excommunication and of silence of the church on the widows who opted for levirate unions, the study went further to discuss the theme of abandonment and neglect experienced by the widows that opted for Abagusii levirate practice in the SDA church in Itumbe Station, South Kenya Conference. The results for the discussion were as illustrated in table 8 above, where a majority (almost all) 140 (94.6%) of the respondents asserted that this cluster of people being excommunicated from the church experience abandonment from the church; Only 8 (5.4%) respondents were neutral of the thesis and none affirmed the thesis. This unanimous response was also confirmed by the qualitative data.

When I lost my husband I experienced lots of loneliness, I lost friends and people dear to me. This reality replicated itself again when I opted for levirate custom due to that loneliness and other responsibilities of caring for the children left to me by my husband. By the fact of this, again the church pushed to that spiritual loneliness where again as a Christian I lost a community of believers. The church seems not cognizant of the seriousness of this matter to widows who being in levirate relationships still want to belong to a spiritual institution (FGDs 46).

The point in the study was that the SDA church abandons her members simply because of some genuine reasons end up in levirate unions. These groups of women in the study area reported their negative experiences of loneliness and abandonment. The group has generated into anger projected to the church. For instance, 85 (57.4%) of the respondents in the questionnaire indicated that there is anger among widows who have been

considered out of the church membership. This anger was not about their inability to face the reality of the fact of the loss of one's husband, but rather directed to the church for not being accommodative to those who are members of church now excommunicated for levirate union.

Finally, the study discussed on the theme of remarriage emphasized by the church. According to the study, even though remarriage is what the church advocates, there are real and serious problems associated with it. The questionnaire findings indicated that 15 (10.1%) of the respondents did not agree with the thesis that remarriage for widows as taught by the church has any embedded problems. 8 (5.4%) of the respondents were neutral on the proposed thesis, while the majority, 115 (77.7%) of the respondents affirmed the thesis that remarriage has serious socio-religious consequences on the widows than levirate unions practiced by the Abagusii community. Participants in the discussions narrated their experiences as follows:

When our husbands died, the church informs that the only life to live is to remarry elsewhere. But the same church is silent on the plight of the children of the deceased husband. When my husband died, I remarried another man in total defiance of the levirate union proposed to me by the elders and family of my late husband. I had two daughters with my late husband whom I went with into the new marriage. As my daughters grew up, my second husband turned them into his wives to the point of impregnating one of my daughters. I regretted why I went into that marriage instead of accepting the levirate union. I walked out of that new marriage but unable to return to the home of my late husband with my children (FDs 43).



Leave alone being considered the lost members of the church, like any human being we also need to be comforted, secured, protected and feel that we are part of the Christian community. When men are bereaved, they are allowed to re-marry very soon but with us, we are comforted that God is our heavenly husband, could He come down and satisfy us sexually? No! We have to be given another chance to also live like other human beings (FGDs 26).

The experience of participants in the study showed that remarriage as advocated by the SDA church could be more unappealing and unsuitable not just for young widows, but also for older women, especially those with children who wish to benefit from the levirate union. Furthermore, the well-being of a widow in terms of identity and belonging continues to be tied to her initial marriage with the deceased husband's home for the children and even herself. Therefore, the idea of remarriage in the biblical tradition does not wholesomely work – in some cases, especially for young widows, it may work even though not all are able to remarry. Sometimes it is hard to get a partner willing to take up a widow together with the children gotten with the deceased husband. However, on this issue, even the Abagusii community should take cognizant of the fact that even in their midst, in-laws are also becoming less willing to inherit the widows of the relatives because of the economic burden of supporting a widow and her family (Okonda, 2017). It is important for the SDA church to understand what widows are going through, and support them from that perspective. Failure to do this would only mean adding them more pain in life (Manala, 2015). The church's perception on widows in Itumbe Station Abagusii Christian must take cognizance of the prevailing socio-cultural realities. Pastoral caregivers for widows should also consider the widow's overall background and current circumstances (Kubeka, 2011). Because of this, Kassily (2004) contends that

Christian women should reject imposed dogmas and biblical interpretations in favor of continuing to synthesize their historical context and contemporary prospects (Okonda, 2018). If this is poorly done, as was said previously in the study, the majority of widows claimed to have continued to suffer in silence, but most people might not be aware of this since it only affected them personally.

The SDA church in contextualizing its theology of marriage in the Abagusii community has to face the noble challenge of the Abagusii levirate custom. The church should also listen to the widows and listen to the Abagusii cultural values of marriage. Additionally, it's crucial to approach the widows with an open mind devoid of judgment while demonstrating empathy, discretion, and personalized pastoral care (Brunsdon, 2019). The development of the SDA church's marital doctrine greatly benefits from assimilating Abagusii marriage customs and ideals. It is not enough to out rightly condemn the Abagusii levirate practice without taking time to understand what it stands for. The success of the SDA church marriage theology will not only come from selectively applying the Biblical texts in her teachings on marriage, but it must also not overlook the already well established faith of the widows. And it should also try to tactfully embrace the Abagusii marriage values and in a way espouse them to the profit of Christianity.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **5.0 Introduction**

This study focused on the implications of the church teachings, particularly the SDA church on levirate practice among the Abagusii community in Itumbe Station, South Kenya Conference. The study had four objectives namely: to establish the Seventh Day Adventist church teaching on levirate practice for the well-being of widows; to evaluate the SDA church support systems/programs for widows in the Seventh Day Adventist Church; to examine factors leading to levirate practice among the Abagusii community; and to assess the challenges facing levirate practice in selected Seventh Day Adventist churches in Itumbe Station, South Kenya Conference. To achieve the summary, conclusions and recommendations of the study, this chapter first examined the composition of the study groups: demographic information of the respondents, age, gender, level of education, employment, marital status, etc. It is important to understand that the primary data obtained using questionnaires was thematically transcribed, analyzed using descriptive statistics, and presented through tables, bar charts, pie charts in the form of percentages and frequencies; while data from interview schedules and FGDs was thematically analyzed and presented in verbatim.

#### **5.1 Demographic findings**

The study sought to determine the demographics of participants and relating them to the main objective of the research on the implications of the SDA church teachings on the Abagusii levirate custom in Itumbe Station, South Kenya Conference: The demographics

that were considered included: gender consisting of 170 (69%) females, and 76 (31%) males. The gender indicator was important in the study because levirate union practice directly affected widows, and therefore, it was appropriate to have more females in the study than males. Gender differential was also affirmed by chapter three that underscored women, particularly widows for FGDs as a data collection tool to incorporate their views and experiences in the study. Therefore, the consideration of gender was important in the study for gender heterogeneity and a holistic analysis of the findings where voices of both women and men were equally included in the study.

In the aspect of age was a factor, study classified participants in groups: between those between 18 – 30 years formed 24%; 31 – 40 years constituted 45% forming the highest number of participants; those of the age bracket of 41 – 50 years constituted 32%; those at 51 – 60 group formed 11%; and those above 60 group formed 7%. Age was an important factor in the study since in capturing the views and experiences of all age groups in matters of the SDA church teachings on marriage, and levirate unions as practiced by the Abagusii Christians in Itumbe Station, South Kenya Conference. Additionally, age was an important differential that contributed substantially on affected widows to opt for levirate unions, remarry or remain single after the death of the husband. Further, the age factor was important in examining widow's experiences since it gave the study insights on the study gaps, while giving the challenges that existed between younger and older widows.

Marital status was another factor of which 82 (33%) of participants were married, 122 (50%) were widows, 30 (12%) were single, and 12 (5%) were widowers. Those widowed formed the greatest majority of the study participants 134 (54%) constituting of widows

and widowers. This helped the study to reflect the varied experiences of all groups in the study on the implications of the church teachings, particularly the SDA church on levirate practice among the Abagusii community in Itumbe Station, South Kenya Conference. Furthermore, marital status was a critical element because levirate custom is a form of marriage union affecting a particular group of church membership that were first married in the church and later on with the death of their husbands they opted for Abagusii levirate custom.

The study also looked at the level of education of the respondents, whereby 50 (20%) had primary education, 161 (65%) completed secondary school education, 16 (7%) tertiary level, 5 (2%) diploma, 27 (11%) degree, and only 3 (1%) had postgraduate education. Education was a critical factor in this study because it gave the ability of the respondents to critically express and address issues on the implications of the church teachings, particularly the SDA church on levirate practice among the Abagusii community in Itumbe Station, South Kenya Conference. Besides, education is not just acquiring knowledge but also enables people to constitute positive changes in themselves; it helps people to make rational decisions. Widows with education are more likely to understand the implications of levirate union custom for one to either like or avoid it.

The study further considered the occupation of the respondents in the study. The findings indicated that 7 (3%) were medical doctors, 4 (2%) carpenters, 9 (4%) pastors, 1 (0.4%) technologists, 5 (2%) civil servants, 52 (21%) businessmen, 109 (44%) peasants, a cluster which most if not all of the widows belonged, and 60 (24%) teachers. As explained in the preceding section, employment is an important factor that plays a greater role in the practice of levirate marriage unions in the SDA church in Itumbe Station, South Kenya

Conference; it is a predictor of why levirate unions are preferred. When a husband who is a provider dies leaving behind unemployed widow there follows a chain of financial constraints. The widow needs a levir or economic empowerment to enable her respond to family material needs; unemployment is associated with so many risk factors for the widows.

Finally, the study took into consideration the position of the respondents in church whereby 16 (7%) were church elders, 1 (0.4%) was a development officer, 4 (2%) were clerks, 48 (20%) were church members without any specific role to play, 28 (11%) were family life leaders, 15 (6%) were widows' leaders, 3 (1%) women ministry leaders, 10 (4%) youth leaders, 8 (3%) treasurers, 1 (0.4%) disability leader, 9 (4%) pastors, 8 (3%) home church leaders, 30 (12%) Sabbath School teachers and 68 (28%) deacons. The respondents' position in the church was considered important as it helped in having a correct understanding and pastoral application of the SDA church's doctrine on marriage and levirate practice among the Abagusii church membership and believers. It helped in the analysis and assessment of the SDA church pastoral ministry.

## **5.2 Summary of the Study Findings**

### **5.2.1 General Summary**

Informed by the two theories: Structural Functional Theory (SFT) and Family Systems Theory (FST), the study revealed that there is a conflict between SDA church structured teachings on the marriage and the Abagusii levirate custom as a family system approach in relooking on the situation of widows in society. Despite the church condemning

Abagusii Levirate custom, some members of the church uphold the practice on the basis of its values in the lives of the widows and their children.

### **5.2.2 Objective One: SDA church Pastoral Teaching and Position on the marriage and Levirate Marriage in Itumbe Station, Kenya**

The study found that the SDA church teaches that marriage is biblical, monogamous and therefore permanent, marriage must be solemnized by the church minister. Those who have lost their partners through death to remarriage or remain unmarried. However, on these postulates the participants who are the membership of the church gave opposing views. Being members, a minority of participants were not in agreement with these church positions. For instance, out of 148 participants who answered the questionnaire, 27 (18.2%) did not agree with the postulate, while 113 (76.3%) were in agreement that marriage is permanent; 23 (15.5%) did not agree that marriage is monogamous, while 125 (84.5%) were of the view that it is monogamous; 2 did not agree that marriage must be solemnized by the church minister, while 145 (98.0%) were in support. Finally, 8 (5.4%) were not in agreement on the view that widows to remarriage or remain unmarried, while 80 were upheld the position. These findings corresponded with both the Old and New Testaments (Isaiah 1, 23; 10, 1-2; Jeremiah 7, 4-16; Matthew 19:1-12; Mark 10:1-12; 1 Timothy 5:3-8, and so on) where marriage is as permanent union between one-man and one-woman coming together to form one flesh bound by mutual consent.

However, the study also showed that despite the SDA church's teachings on marriage against Abagusii levirate custom, table 9 below affirmed the position of participants who were also members of the SDA church in Itumbe Station, South Kenya Conference.

**Table 9: SDA church Pastoral Teaching and Position on the marriage and Levirate**

**Marriage custom**

Item	SD	D	N	A	SA	Total
Levirate union is biblical and good for widows to embrace it	R-10 %-6.8	13 8.8	10 6.8	22 14. 9	93 62.8	148 100 %
The church is right to prohibit levirate unions	R-85 %- 57.4	25 16.9	20 13.5	10 6.8	8 5.4	148 100 %
Levirate marriage unions are bad for the church	R-101 %- 68.2	11 7.4	20 13.5	10 6.8	6 4.1	148 100&

Key: R – Respondents, %-Percentage

Source: Field Data, 2023

The findings indicated that the SDA church is not right to prohibit levirate unions among her membership; according to the majority in the study Abagusii levirate custom is not bad for the church, and therefore should not be prohibited. The church should reconsider her doctrinal position. From the narratives, sexual urge is not the only reasons why the Abagusii practice levirate custom, there other positive reasons and therefore to think that levirate union as unacceptable and therefore bad for the membership of the church is a misconception of the practice, and a misunderstanding of the Holy Scriptures. The church position expressed through above field findings are inconsistent with Carol Meyers, et al (2000) who argued in favor of levirate custom expressing that the levirate law is in fact the only law in the Bible that includes an act of humiliation as penalty against the offender, the levir who rejects to take up his deceased brother’s widow.



### **5.2.3 Objective Two: Church Support programs for Widows in the Seventh Day Adventist church in Itumbe Station, Kenya**

The study found that widows in the SDA church face innumerable challenges that come with the loss of a spouse, which include discriminatory regards, isolation, and poor access to basic services like healthcare, material poverty, psychosocial trauma, demoralization, fearfulness, emptiness, helplessness and abandonment to loneliness. This state of affairs raises the need for church support systems that profit widows. Church widow support systems are meant to comfort, support and encourage widows so that they find understanding of their condition in Christian faith. The findings showed that there are church support systems.

The findings were divided into two categories: Physical provisions and psychosocial service: The results were as follows: existence elaborate widow pastoral care ministry/program with 110 (74.3%) respondents were generally in disagreement that there are elaborate widow pastoral care ministry/program; 20 (13.5%) were undecided, and a minority consisting of 18 (12.2%) of the respondents were in agreement. On the provision of health care, 31(20.9%) of the respondents are in disagreement, 22 (14.7%) were neutral and 95 (64.2 %) were of the opinion that the church does provide health services to the widows. On provision of material basic needs like food, shelter, education the results in table 4.4 indicated that 23 (15.5%) did not agree that the church fully takes charge of this service of provision of material needs, 99 (66.9%) of the respondents, which is the majority were undecided – not having clear knowledge of the church’s role in this aspect of widows’ lives, while 26 (17.6%) were in agreement. On economic empowerment, the study looked at the church’s provision of financial support to widows for their economic development, training of widows for economic development,

entrepreneurial sensitization workshops and seminars to empower widows in the church. The results were as specified in table 4.5 above, where 95 (64.2%) of the respondents were in disagreement of the SDA church economically empowering widows; 15 (10.1%) of the respondents were undecided, and 38 (25.7%) supported the thesis that the SDA church empowers women economically.

The findings are supported by the Holy Scripture which encourages widow care and levirate unions; the church and the entire Christian fraternity are obliged to practice Widow Care in relation to the Biblical teachings: (Isaiah 1, 23; 10, 1-2; Jeremiah 7, 4-16; Matthew 19:1-12; Mark 10:1-12; 1Timothy 5:3-8, and so on). However, the findings also indicated that the SDA church has done very little to see to it that the needs of genuine widows are met appropriately, which leaves room to consider the embracement of levirate custom as practiced by the Abagusii community of Christians who profess and follow the SDA church teaching, dogmas and faith.

But the study also found that on the aspect of psychosocial support systems for the support of widows, the SDA church in Itumbe Station, South Kenya Conference is performing pretty well. Table 10 below gives the summary of the questionnaire findings.

**Table 10: SDA church widow Psychosocial Support programs**

Item	SD	D	N	A	SA	Total
House visitations of widows for companionship	R-00 %-0.0	00 0.0	00 0.0	20 13. 5	128 86. 5	148 100%
Self-help church groups for widows	R-00 %-0.0	00 0.0	00 0.0	21 14. 2	127 85. 8	148 100%
Spiritual counseling (spiritual needs)	R-00 %-0.0	00 0.0	00 0.0	18 12. 2	138 93. 2	148 100%

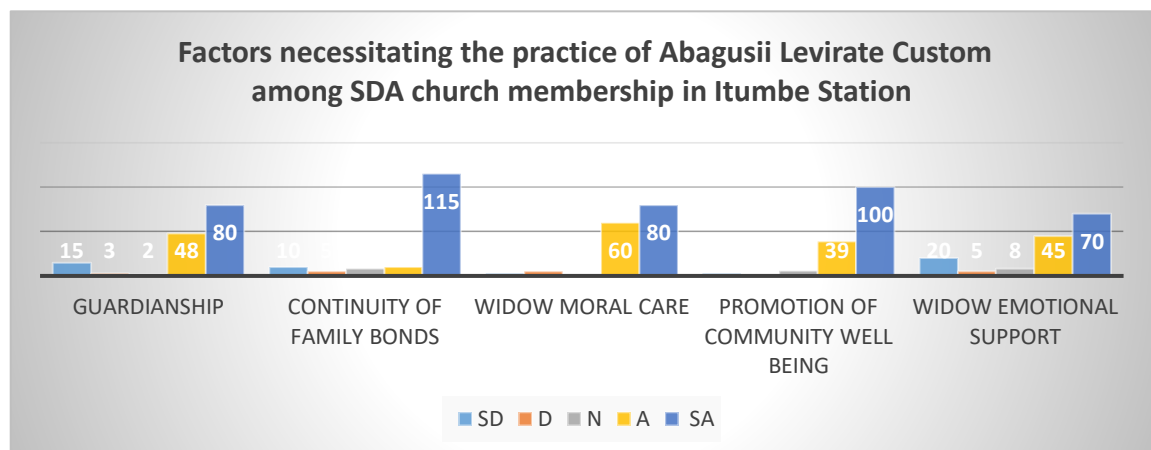
*Key: R – Respondents, %-Percentage*

**Source:** Field Data, 2023

The findings were also supported by the narratives from the interviews and FGDs that encouraged the church membership to continue providing spiritual counseling services to the widows. The findings were supported by Vitelli (2015) who suggested that for the widow to overcome grief and loneliness, the bereaved will need to get their own support, socio-spiritual support, professional counseling, and especially the use of cognitive behavior therapy to counter negative thinking. However, the study noted the mishap of enhanced individualized spiritual support; there was lack of professional spiritual counseling in ministering to widows. To be more effective, the use of professional counselling energizes widows to open up and express themselves emotionally, reaffirming the support of the coping mechanisms to boost self-esteem and autonomy for the restoration quality of life (Kayode, 2011). Pastoral caregivers ought to intensify individualized pastoral care to widows by visiting and counseling the widows to enable them overcome fear, stigma, loneliness, grief and anger.

**5.2.4 Objective Three: Factors influencing the practice of Abagusii levirate custom among the Christian community in Itumbe Station, Kenya .**

The study looked at the factors influencing the practice of Abagusii levirate custom among the SDA church faithful. It did that under the argument that the SDA church condemns the Abagusii levirate custom yet it does not have enough resources to fully care for the widows and their children; furthermore, the church appears not have convincing Biblical and pastoral reasons to warrant the condemnation of levirate custom, instead, it has weak arguments against the embracement of Abagusii levirate custom. The SDA church makes spiritual exaltations that that are far from the context of the local church community that is entangled between two realities (SDA faith and the Abagusii culture) that all look for solutions affecting widows. The summary of the findings is as presented in figure 12 below.



**Figure 12: Factors necessitating the practice of Abagusii Levirate Custom among SDA church membership in Itumbe Station**

**Source:** Field Data, 2023

On the theme of widow and children guardianship, the data showed that the Abagusii community attaches great importance to widow guardianship. These proponents of the practice of levirate custom argue that widow guardianship is of supreme importance and cannot be washed away by modern trends life – Christianity, Western lifestyles and modern laws. The significance of the practice ranges from socio- economic to psychological aspects. The findings are in tandem with Ngore (2012) and Wanjiku (1997) who explained that when a man dies and leaves his family behind, the levir takes up the responsibility of providing basic services and protects the widow and her children from any forms of threats. This is also reaffirmed by Gunga (2009), who concisely emphasizes that it is the brother's duty to care for the wife and children of his deceased brother in order to provide for their basic needs; the levir appointed to act as the widow's guardian must be a relative of the deceased. Levirate union is given great attention since it offered social capital and safety for widows (Gneezy et al., 2016). Widow guardians were recruited and given the traditional responsibility to guard and protect the widow through the kinship system.

On the factor of continuity of family bonds, the findings from the field explain that according to the Abagusii culture, the community believes that having an heir to care for the deceased man's property cannot be compromised, so if a married man died without children, particularly male children, his family would expect his widow to marry someone in the family, typically a brother of the deceased. Therefore, through levirate arrangement, the widow cannot divorce herself from the deceased husband's family and remarry outside of the family.

About moral care of the widow, the study findings established that even though there were divergent views, Abagusii levirate custom helps to maintain moral integrity of the widow by minimizing sexual immorality. In order to prevent her from engaging in indiscriminate sex with other men, sexually active widows practice the levirate ritual with her in-laws. The results were in line with those of Platteau, et al. (2012), who said that levirate marriage institutes a better alternative in prostitution conditions; an unmarried widow, influenced by the circumstances of her widowhood, may easily fall prey to prostitution and other indiscriminate sexual interactions with other men.

On the community wellbeing, the data showed that the Abagusii community fully involved the widow in community activities since she always need social support from the community members and families to assist her during the journey of widowhood which also can mitigate the experiencing of the effects of stressors (Anusic& Lucas 2013). The family and the community cannot afford to lose their children by allowing them go away with their mother to another home. Both the quantitative questionnaire findings and the qualitative findings are in tandem with Shorter (1975) who argued that levirate practice is intended to keep in touch the two families (the family of the woman and her husband), which give children a sense of blood belonging to their deceased father, relatives and community.

Regarding the theme of emotional support of the widow, the findings showed an overwhelming support of the thesis 115 (77.7%) respondents affirming that levirate custom of the Abagusii community goes beyond sexual intimacy to giving emotional support to the widow and her children. The findings are consistent with Zaedi (2006) who asserted that widowhood entails emotional loss and change in lifestyle, identity, social status and roles that can only be filled by the levir. It is true that social, economic

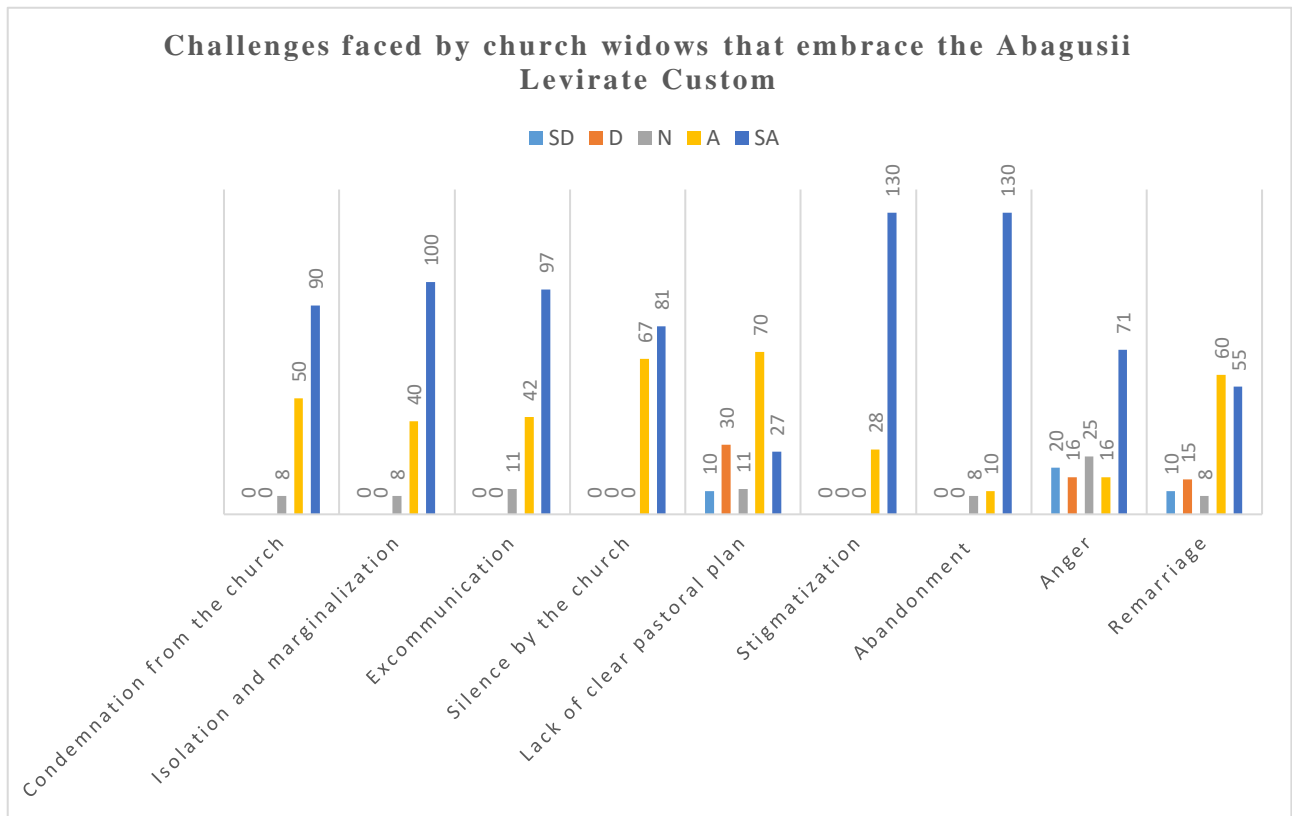
and emotional support can be provided by the family members, community and society at large to enable the victim cope with the change of life. However, in agreement with De Jong Gierveld (2002) the study argued that spouses tend to be the best sources of long-term emotional support. Spousal relationships provide profound proximity between individuals, interpersonal commitment, and shared interests that define companionship and ensure the exchange of support. This cannot be given by anybody else other than the levir who lives in a marriage relationship with the widow.

In general, therefore, the findings indicated that widows were not properly cared by the church, which opens a window for levirate custom to take care of them; church does not have consistent and long terms support systems for widows. SDA church widows are more vulnerable since some of them depend solely on the alms collected and the good will of the people. The support systems include distribution of food items and material needs for their comfort and relief, which is not enough for their basic needs. They continue to suffer in silence yet most people may not know since all that remained to their inner selves. Some were involved in extramarital affairs just to keep up with the outward set standards of Christian life as a widow in the church, which equally endanger their lives.

#### **5.2.5 Objective Four: Challenges encountered by widows who have embraced Levirate custom in Itumbe Station, Kenya**

The study sought to establish and discuss the challenges encountered by SDA church widows who embrace Abagusii levirate custom in Itumbe Station, South Kenya

Conference. The study found that such widows undergo numerous challenges and difficulties as summarized in figure 13 below;



**Figure 13: Challenges faced by church widows that embrace the Abagusii Levirate Custom**

**Source:** Field Data, 2023

The field findings are consistent with Usha (2011) who postulated that in Holland nearly every Christian community has structures that are supported through the offerings of the members; however, within those structures still church widows are sometimes subjected into various kinds of sufferings and mistreatment. The results in figure 13 above indicated that none of those answering the questionnaire was in disagreement of the fact that women who embrace levirate custom undergo condemnation from the church.



On the theme of ex-communication, the results indicated that none of those who answered the questionnaire disagreed with the thesis that widows who embrace levirate custom experience ex-communication from the church.

The results in figure 13 above indicated that none of those who answered the questionnaire disagreed with the thesis that widows who embrace levirate custom experience ex-communication from the church.

The field findings showed that none of the respondents disagreed with the postulate that the church isolates widows in levirate unions, 8 (5.4%) were neutral and 140 (94.6%) were in agreement with the postulate. The findings revealed that the isolation of widows who are in levirate union comes in different forms where they are left disengaged in social and church interactions and events.

On the theme of silence of the SDA church on the plight of those who accepted levirate custom, the results in figure 13 above indicated that none of those who answered the questionnaire disagreed with the thesis that widows who embrace levirate custom experience silence from the church, and none of the participants were neutral. Instead, all respondents 148 (100%) were in agreement that widows who are in levirate unions experience or silence indifference from the church; their issues are never part of the church concern. The situation of silence on the plight of widows who opt for whichever way of life is stressed in the study by Chauke (2003) who observed that churches in Zimbabwe take a detached stance in the reality of widows who are supposed to take care of the children left to them with their deceased spouses. Bellamy (2005) also asserted that the silence and inaction from the Christian community that surrounds widowhood for proper care of themselves and their children is morally wrong and unacceptable.

On stigmatization in the church, the findings in table 13 reveal that all participants 148 (100%) who answered the questionnaire were of the position that widows who engage in levirate marriage are stigmatized by the church membership.

Finally, the study discussed on the theme of remarriage emphasized by the church. According to the study, even though remarriage is what the church advocates, there are real and serious problems associated with it. The questionnaire findings indicated that 15 (10.1%) of the respondents did not agree with the thesis that remarriage for widows as taught by the church has any embedded problems. 8 (5.4%) of the respondents were neutral on the proposed thesis, while the majority, 115 (77.7%) of the respondents affirmed the thesis that remarriage has serious socio-religious consequences on the widows than levirate unions practiced by the Abagusii community.

In general, the above findings indicated that widows face rejection which was expressed as discrimination, desertion, isolation and the fear of rejection. The widows experienced the loss of intimacy, company and relationship support from the church membership. The contradiction in all this is that besides the church the community participating in supporting the widows by providing widows the basic necessities of life, the same church segregates, denies them material support abandons, stigmatizes and excommunicates them on the grounds that opted for Abagusii levirate custom. The findings were in agreements with Onyancha (2014:9) who argued that it is not only that widow lost their husbands, but widowhood state of being robs them of their status and condemns them to the brims of society where they suffer life-threatening forms of discrimination, stigma and deprivation.

### **5.3 Conclusions of the Study Findings**

The study made a number of conclusions, which are pegged along the four thematic areas/objectives: to establish the Seventh Day Adventist church teaching on levirate practice for the well-being of widows; evaluate the SDA church support systems/programs for widows in the Seventh Day Adventist Church; examine factors leading to levirate practice among the Abagusii community; and to assess the challenges facing levirate practice in selected Seventh Day Adventist churches in Itumbe Station, South Kenya Conference.

#### **5.3.1 General Conclusion**

The study concluded that despite the SDA church condemnation of the Abagusii levirate custom, its practice by the membership of the church is still on; the church has not completely managed to eradicate it. The practice of Abagusii levirate custom points to the fact that as a cultural practice, the SDA church has to live with it. The study did not advocate for total abolition of the levirate custom nor did it endorse the traditional conservative view that it should be continued in total. Rather, the study argued that the Abagusii levirate custom has many structural and family functional values still relevant today. However, like any other practice or Christian value, the practice is sometimes abused. On this issue of abuse, the study argued that levirate custom should be freed of its abuses, repressive and unacceptable elements that make it unpalatable. For the continuity of the custom, it should not be compulsory; the Christian widow should be left free to decide either to enter into the levirate union or not.

### **5.3.2 Objective One: SDA church Pastoral Teaching and Position on the marriage and Levirate Marriage in Itumbe Station, Kenya .**

The study concluded that the SDA church has made attempts to interpret Biblical teachings on marriage considering it a permanent, monogamous contract, solemnized by the church minister. In the view of the church, any marriage union that does not adhere to these elements is considered no marriage at all. The SDA church in her teachings condemns the Abagusii levirate custom considering it immoral, sinful, and not acceptable by the church. However, the study concluded that the SDA church selectively and conveniently applies the Holy Scriptures on marriage to suit her position, while leaving out other aspects and biblical texts and contexts on levirate unions in the Judeo-Christian tradition. This points to theological inadequacy of those who are charged with the teachings of the church on marriage.

The SDA church appears not have convincing Biblical and pastoral reasons to warrant the condemnation of levirate custom; instead, it has weak arguments against the embracement of Abagusii levirate custom; the church makes biblical claims that are far from the context of the local church community that is entangled between two realities that both search for solutions affecting widows.

The study did not also advocate for the abolishment of the SDA church teachings on marriage and Abagusii traditional levirate custom, rather it argued on the embracement of positive aspects of the custom while denouncing those that do not adhere to the well-being of the Christian widows; not all about levirate custom is bad. The SDA church ought to adopt an alternative suitable approach in her regard to Abagusii levirate custom;

an approach that can produce a favorable effect in her encounter with the native Abagusii people concerning levirate union to avoid any doctrinal and pastoral conflict. In her evangelism activity, the SDA church should become aware not only in addressing the gospel message to individuals, and to show how its teachings are contrary to the Abagusii levirate practice but also try to understand the significant aspects found in the levirate practice itself. This will benefit the SDA church to understand the importance of levirate marriage practiced by her own membership.

### **5.2.3 Objective Two: Church Support programs for Widows in the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Itumbe Station, Kenya**

On the SDA church widow support systems, she concluded that widowhood presents itself with concrete and real serious physical, economic, social, psychological and ecclesial challenges that adversely affect the wellbeing of widows and that of the children in their care. For this reason, the church has some measures in place to give quick and short time relieve to the widows. However, the church has done very little to see to it that the needs of genuine widows are met appropriately. This is contrary to the Abagusii traditional form of care expressed through levirate custom, where widows are fully cared as an expression of love and respect to the deceased and his family. Without providing for widows, it would be unrealistic and far-fetched on the part of the church to unrealistically denounce the Abagusii levirate marriage arrangement that attended to the needs of the widows. Many widows in the church move to Abagusii levirate custom because in the church because they are not catered for. Thus, for the SDA church to be realistic in her teachings the pastoral aspect of widow care is paramount; the SDA church must fully embrace the

challenge to advance social-economic programs possibly run by widow church groups that would encourage other widows to pull together their resources, save and even access bank loans to provide for themselves and their dependents. This would help to avoid unrealistic reliance and expectations on the church.

Pastoral caregivers to widows are not professionally trained to holistically understand the reality of the widows. For instance, there is no professional counseling of the widows since there are no professional and trained counselors in the church to attend to widows. A widow who visits a pastoral caregiver may not receive satisfactory assistance because the spiritual caregiver has adequate awareness of the grieving process, making it difficult for them to know what to do when and how. This results in widows suffering in silence while Christians and people around them continue to believe that because so much time has passed since the death, they have now come to terms with it. In Itumbe Station, South Kenya Conference, this calls for pastoral-theological training among the clergy and Christians on the accompaniment of the widows.

The study further concluded that by engaging widows in the pastoral ministry of the church overcomes the stereotypes labelled on them and also demystifies the negative regards about them, which let them to prove themselves as equally productive in the Christian community. This study conclusion is supported by Ellison (2015) who asserted that increased Christian activities make people more productive, while lessening other vices. Additionally, Stairs (2011) argued that having churches in a neighbourhood boosts residents' religiosity, which in turn leads to good contributions to the neighbourhood. The church is able to offer significant assistance to the community in direct socio-evangelical services like community volunteering, education, and civic skills training, among many

others, when all church groups and memberships are included in the pastoral ministry of the church (Potvin et al., 2011).

#### **5.2.4 Objective Three: Factors influencing the practice of Abagusii levirate custom among the Christian community in Itumbe Station, Kenya**

On the factors necessitating the practice of Abagusii levirate custom, the study concluded that the practice of levirate custom among the church membership implies that the custom has value to them despite being Christians following the teachings of the SDA church. However, the SDA church condemns the Abagusii levirate custom yet it does not have enough resources to fully care for the widows and their children. The study concluded that widows lack necessary church support systems that could help them to cope with the loss of their spouses and the new situation of solely bringing up the children left to them; Abagusii levirate custom gives widows a sense of belonging and psychosocial and economic protection. Pastorally, since the widows are not fully attended by the church, the Abagusii levirate marriage custom fills some of the pastoral gaps on the care of widows in Itumbe Station, South Kenya Conference. The SDA church should deeply start looking at the issues concerning widows in the various local church communities as a way to be practical in her pastoral ministry of the widows.

The SDA church has to rethink her position and engage in a serious study on the Abagusii levirate custom and consider aspects that apposite instead of outrightly denouncing the entire custom and practices associated to it. The church is challenged to relook on her pastoral theology on marriage, especially in the Abagusii context

#### **5.2.5 Objective Four: Challenges encountered by widows who have embraced Levirate custom in Itumbe Station, Kenya**

On objective four on the challenges encountered by church widows who opt for the Abagusii levirate custom, rather than being a place of hope, the SDA church in Itumbe Station, South Kenya Conference in some parts has become a place of discouragement and rejection of the church membership (widows) who are conceived to have deviated from the church. There is excommunication, exclusion, stigma and discrimination against widows who have opted for the Abagusii levirate custom.

These challenges should be addressed adequately if the SDA church authentically desires to fulfill its mandate of widow care and the care of the perceived lost souls. Abagusii levirate custom, despite the church's candid condemnation is something that is not to end because the same membership which adheres to the SDA church teachings practices the Abagusii levirate custom either in a hidden or pronounced manner.

#### **5.4 Recommendations of the Study**

Finally, the study made a series of recommendations based on the study objectives. The recommendations are founded upon field data gaps and on the discussions of the findings on the implications of the SDA church's teachings on the practice of Abagusii levirate custom in Itumbe Station, Kenya .



#### **5.4.1 Objective One: SDA church Pastoral Teaching and Position on the marriage and Levirate Marriage in Itumbe Station, Kenya .**

The church position and regulations that regard a perfect marriage to be that which has gone through church wedding is a serious misconception on marriage since there are various forms of marriage theologically acknowledged in the Holy Scriptures; it is, therefore, minimalistic to reduce marriage to monogamy. The SDA church ought to reexamine her dogmatic teaching and application of the Holy Scriptures on marriage and sexuality.

The study recommends for an inculturated marriage theology that objectively considers the Judeo-Christian biblical foundations on levirate marriage. This will help the SDA church leadership and membership to properly apply Biblical theology on marriage in her pastoral ministry. Reconstructing theological training of clergy to embrace knowledge on marriage among Christians is mandatory for a contextualized pastoral and Biblical application on marriage issues, including levirate marriage. To realize this, the study recommends for regular theological workshops for pastors and the entire elite group of the SDA church.

The study, therefore, recommends that the SDA church should embrace the positive aspects of levirate custom and inculturate them into her theology on marriage and sexuality.

#### **5.4.2 Objective Two: Church Support programs for Widows in the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Itumbe Station, Kenya.**

The study recommends that the SDA church to establish a pastoral ministry of widowhood that would help widows access resources and services like pastoral care and counseling. This ministry would serve as a foundation for churches and all believers to get more involved in the ministry of widowhood and play a crucial role in supporting them by raising awareness and making other support systems available to improve their wellbeing. Through widow profiling and documentation, the local churches would be the starting point for raising awareness of widows and facilitating the enrollment of widows with real needs. The widows should be encouraged to engage in self-care activities and income-generating projects through the churches in order to assist and enhance their wellness.

The study also recommends for the SDA church membership to be fully involved through the strengthening of pastoral care ministry and possibly through the creation of a ministry of widowhood, where personalized professional psychosocial and spiritual counselling can be offered to widows.

The study further recommends for a multicultural and faith based approach to widow; the interface of culture and church widow support systems to complement each other. This is meant to dissipate the monopoly of the church in matters of widowhood; the integration of cultural values for widow care demonstrates the church's willingness to incorporate positive the Abagusii cultural values into Christianity.

#### **5.4.3 Objective Three: Factors influencing the practice of Abagusii levirate custom among the Christian community in Itumbe Station, Kenya .**

The study recommends for the empowerment of widows in the church regardless of their options of life: remarriage, remain unmarried or levirate. The empowerment of widows enables them find solutions to their own problem and lessens the dependency habits that sometimes irritate some members of society who consider them to people who are there unable to do anything for themselves. The Abagusii cultural marriage and compassionate values should also be given ecclesial space to influence the lives of widows. Empowerment a person based means through which affected widows reduce their powerlessness and alienation and gain greater control over all facets of their lives and their socio-ecclesial environment. A faith that is not based on the positive aspects of the people's culture is a pretentious faith that ends up in a double and contradictory Christian lifestyle.

#### **5.4.4 Objective Four: Challenges encountered by widows who have embraced Levirate custom in selected Seventh Day Adventist churches in Itumbe Station, Kenya**

The study recommends the SDA church to show compassion towards widows who opted to have levirate relationships. It should show God's persistent concern for widows and orphans. Given that widows were the most vulnerable people in the historical world, God's concern for them has been one of the key themes emphasized in both the Old and New Testaments. Despite participating in levirate unions, widows already face physical, emotional, and spiritual challenges that the church community needs to address. This does not necessarily imply that the widows should receive all of their assistance from the

family and the church for the remainder of their lives. Segregating, condemning and excommunicating widows from the church do not replicate the message of the Holy Scriptures and the mission of the church. The SDA church in Itumbe Station, South Kenya Conference seems to neglect the New Testament teachings on the care of widows.

### **5.5 Suggestions for Further Studies**

The study made some suggestions for further studies around widowhood:

1. For the continuity of research, the study recommended for a research on Abagusii widowhood rituals that can be accepted and adapted in the Christian ways of widow care systems since the SDA church serves the same community where levirate custom is practiced.
2. The study also recommended a research on the capability of levirate widows in the church. This will demystify the misconceptions around widowhood.

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX 1: RESPONDENTS QUESTIONNAIRE

Please read the instructions given and answer the questions appropriately. It is important to read carefully and correctly before making an attempt. The information provided will strictly be used for this research purpose.

#### 1.1 Section A: Demographic Information

I am Ruth Nyanchama Moronya, Reg. No. DAS/60020/14, a student at Kisii University taking a Doctoral Degree in Religious Studies now carrying out a research on the Implications of the Church Teachings on Levirate practice among Abagusii community in the SDA church, Itumbe Station, Kenya. Your assistance and participation in filling in this questionnaire will help in achieving the goals of the study that are intended to help the SDA church and the general church community. Do not include your name anywhere on the questionnaire.

<b>Item</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Gender	
Age	
Academic Level	
Status (married, single, widow)	
Occupation	
Church Position	

**1.2 Section B:** The Church’s teaching on levirate unions for the well-being of widows  
in Seventh Day Adventist Church in Itumbe Station

<b>Item</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>	<b>Total</b>
Marriage is permanent						
Marriage is monogamous,						
Marriage must be solemnized in the church						
Widows to remarriage or remain unmarried						
Remarried widows are entitled to have children						
Levirate unions involve sexual intimacy						
Levirate unions are bad for the church						
Polygamy and levirate unions not accepted and considered sinful						
Levirate union is biblical and therefore is good and widows to embrace it						
The church is losing members in levirate unions						
The church is right to prohibit levirate unions						

**1.3 Section D:**Church support systems/programs for widows in the Seventh Day  
Adventist Church in Itumbe Station

<b>Item</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>	<b>Total</b>
Exists an elaborate widow pastoral care ministry/program						
Provision of Healthcare						
Provision of material support like shelter, food, etc						
Provision of psycho-social support						
Provision of training for young widows on how to support their children,						
Sponsoring education for the children						
Empowerment of widows for economic development						

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Inclusion of widows in church activities

Self-help church groups for widows

Spiritual counseling

House visitations of widows for companionship

Widows in levirate union to receive same care as wives

Encouraging widows to remarry

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#### **1.4 Section E:** Relevance of levirate union among the Abagusii community in Itumbe

Station

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<b>Item</b>	<b>S</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>	<b>Total</b>
		<b>D</b>				

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The Continuity of Family Bonds

Guardianship for the Widow and Children

Moral Care of the Widow

Community Promotion

Enlargement of church membership

A widow is entitled to have children with the levir

Gives the widow another chance to fulfill her sexual needs

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**1.5 Section F: Challenges facing levirate unions in the SDA Church in Itumbe Station**

<b>Item</b>	<b>S</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>SA</b>	<b>Total</b>
		<b>D</b>				
Condemnation from the church						
Isolation and marginalization from the Christian community						
Ex-communication from the church						
Silence from the church to their plight						
Lack of basic necessities of life						
Stigmatization						
Abandonment						
No clear pastoral programs for the care of widows in the SDA						
Anger						
Remarriage is the major problem of the widow.						

## **APPENDIX II: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE GUIDE FOR KEY INFORMANTS**

I am Ms. Ruth Nyanchama Moronya, Reg. No. DAS/60020/14, a student at Kisii University taking a, a student of Kisii University studying for a PhD in Religious Studies. I am conducting a research on the implications of church teaching on levirate union practice among the SDA church Abagusii members in Itumbe Station, Kenya. You have been selected to take part in the study by giving key information that will bring a better understanding and relevance of the study. The information you provide will be treated with utmost confidentiality. In advance, I appreciate your anticipated co-operation in giving relevant information that will serve those affected with the reality of death in the SDA church membership in Itumbe Station, South Kenya Conference and the entire Christian Church in the world that is faced by levirate union cultural practice.

### **2.1 SECTION A: BACKGROUND INFORMATION OF THE PARTICIPANTS**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Gender	
Age	
Academic Level	
Status (married, single, widow)	
Occupation	
Church Position	

**2.2 SECTION B: SPECIFIC INTERVIEW GUIDE QUESTIONS FOR ABAGUSII  
ELDERS AND FAMILY OF THE DECEASED**

1. As a member of this community, would you say that death of a partner marks the end of a marriage? Explain
2. What becomes of a wife after the death of a husband?
3. What becomes of children of the deceased when a widow marries elsewhere?
4. What do you think are the reasons which underlie the practice of levirate? Of the reasons you have mentioned, which one do you think is the most important one?
5. Do you think every widow should enter into a leviratic union? Explain
6. In your view, must a leviratic union involve sex? Explain
7. What becomes of those children born in a levirate union?
8. Don't you think it is unfair for the church to ban levirate union practice? Explain
9. What are the perceptions of levirate unions in the community?

**2.2 SECTION C: FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS GUIDE**

1. As members of the SDA church, is there a widow based pastoral program? Explain your response.
2. Is levirate practice widely practiced in both the church and Abagusii?
3. What major challenges to encounter as widows? Explain.
4. What are the reasons for the continued practice of levirate unions? Explain

5. Must all widows enter into a leviratic union?
  6. Are those who practice levirate union accepted in the SDA church? Explain
  7. What does the church do to empower you economically?
  8. What are some of the sanctions given to those who opt for levirate custom in the SDA church?
  9. Are you financially supported by the church? Explain
  10. When your husband dies, will you opt for a levirate union? Explain?
  11. In the Abagusii community, is a widow allowed to marry somewhere else?  
Explain
  12. Is a widow entitled to have children with the inherited husband?
  13. What happens to a widow when the man she cohabits with dies? Is she entitled to inheritance again? Explain.
- 
- 10 (For widows) Have you ever been engaged in a leviratic union? If yes, explain your experience. If not, why?
  11. (For widows) How is the relationship between the deceased husband and the children of your inheritor?
  12. Supposing you entered into a leviratic union, would you want to have children in that union? Explain
  13. Are widows entitled to inheritance from the levirate union?

14. Are widows entitled to inheritance from their deceased husband?
15. Do you think the SDA church is right in prohibiting widow inheritance? Explain.
16. If a young widow cannot be inherited, who can best take care of her?
17. In your own views how widows should be taken care of in the church?
18. From your own point of view, what advice would you give to fellow widows before they engage themselves into levirate union?

## **2.2 Section D:** Interview Guide for the Pastors

1. Is there an elaborate widow pastoral care ministry/program?
2. From your own point of view, what advice would you give to fellow widows before they engage themselves into levirate union?
  3. Generally, what is your understanding of a leviratic union?
  4. Why does the SDA church forbid levirate customary practice?
  5. What does your church do to financially support the widows?
  6. What does advocate for widows who are young? Explain
  7. Does the SDA church baptize or receive into its membership children gotten from levirate unions? Explain
  8. What is the SDA church's reaction to the levirate marriage?
  9. Do you see any possibility that the SDA church will change its stand on levirate union?
10. Do you feel that the Church is winning or losing the long term struggle to encourage or discourage the Abagusii from levirate union?



11. Do you think it wise if the Church recognized the Abagusii custom of levirate union?
12. Do you allow widows who have sexually related with brother-in-laws have important responsibilities in the SDA church? Explain
13. What strategies does the SDA church place for the care of widows?
14. What is the best way to care for the widows in the SDA church?
15. Does the SDA church loose membership to levirate practice? Explain
16. What changes do you wish to see as regards the current pastoral program for the widows in the SDA church?
17. Is the widow inheritance really a marriage in full sense or is it a way of caring for a widow?
18. As a church official, do agree with levirate unions? Explain
19. What strategies does the SDA church place to assist widows?
20. Has Christianity helped in increasing or decreasing levirate marriage among the Abagusii?

**APPENDIX III: FORWARDING LETTER TO NACOSTI FROM RESEARCH  
DEPARTMENT, KISII UNIVERSITY**



**KISII UNIVERSITY**

Telephone: +25420 2352059  
Facsimile: +254020 2491131  
Email: [research@kisiiversity.ac.ke](mailto:research@kisiiversity.ac.ke)

P O BOX 408 – 40200  
KISII  
[www.kisiiversity.ac.ke](http://www.kisiiversity.ac.ke)

**OFFICE OF THE REGISTRAR RESEARCH AND EXTENSION**

**REF:** KSU/R&E/ 03/5/ 603

**DATE:** 26<sup>th</sup> October, 2022

**The Head, Research Coordination  
National Council for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI)  
Utalii House, 8<sup>th</sup> Floor, Uhuru Highway  
P. O. Box 30623– 00100  
NAIROBI - KENYA.**

Dear Sir/Madam

**RE: MORONYA NYANCHAMA RUTH DAS/60020/14**

The above mentioned is a student of Kisii University currently pursuing a Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Religious Studies. The topic of her research is, *“Implications of the church teachings on levirate practice among Abagusii community: A study of selected seventh day Adventist churches, Itumbe Station, Kisii Kenya”*.

We are kindly requesting for assistance in acquiring a research permit to enable her carry out the research.

Thank you.

for Prof. Anakalo Shitandi, PhD  
**Registrar, Research and Extension**

**Cc:** DVC (ASA)  
Registrar (ASA)  
Director SPGS

**APPENDIX IV: NACOSTI PERMIT**

Republic of Kenya  
National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation

Ref No: **389782**

**RESEARCH LICENSE**



**This is to Certify that Ms. RUTH NYANCHAMA MORONYA of Kisii University, has been licensed to conduct research as per the provision of the Science, Technology and Innovation Act, 2013 (Rev.2014) in Kisii, Nyamira on the topic: IMPLICATIONS OF THE CHURCH TEACHINGS ON LEVIRATE PRACTICE AMONG ABAGUSHII COMMUNITY: A STUDY OF SELECTED SEVENTH DAY ADVENTIST CHURCHES, ITUMBE STATION - KISII, KENYA for the period ending : 21/February/2024.**

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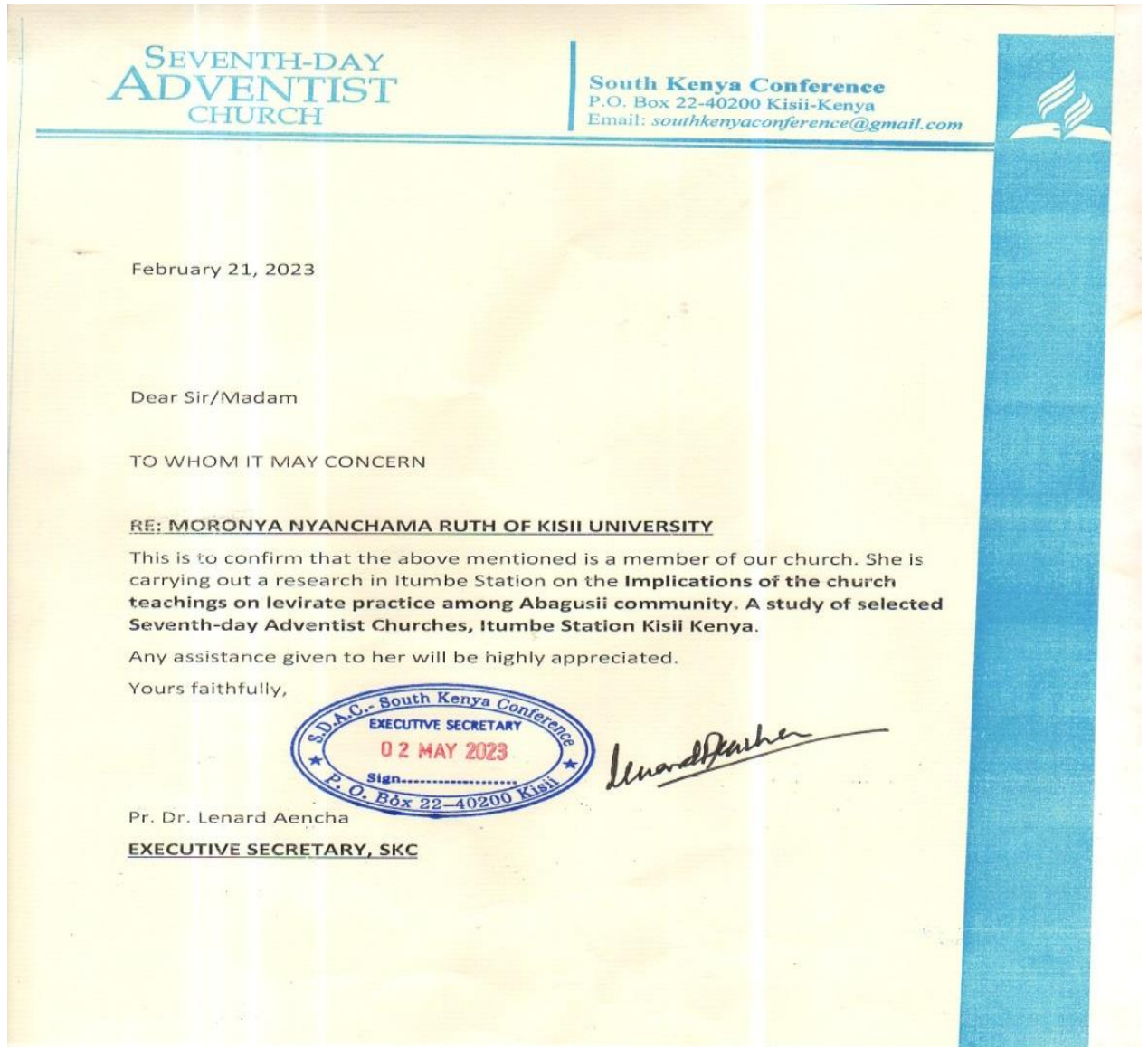
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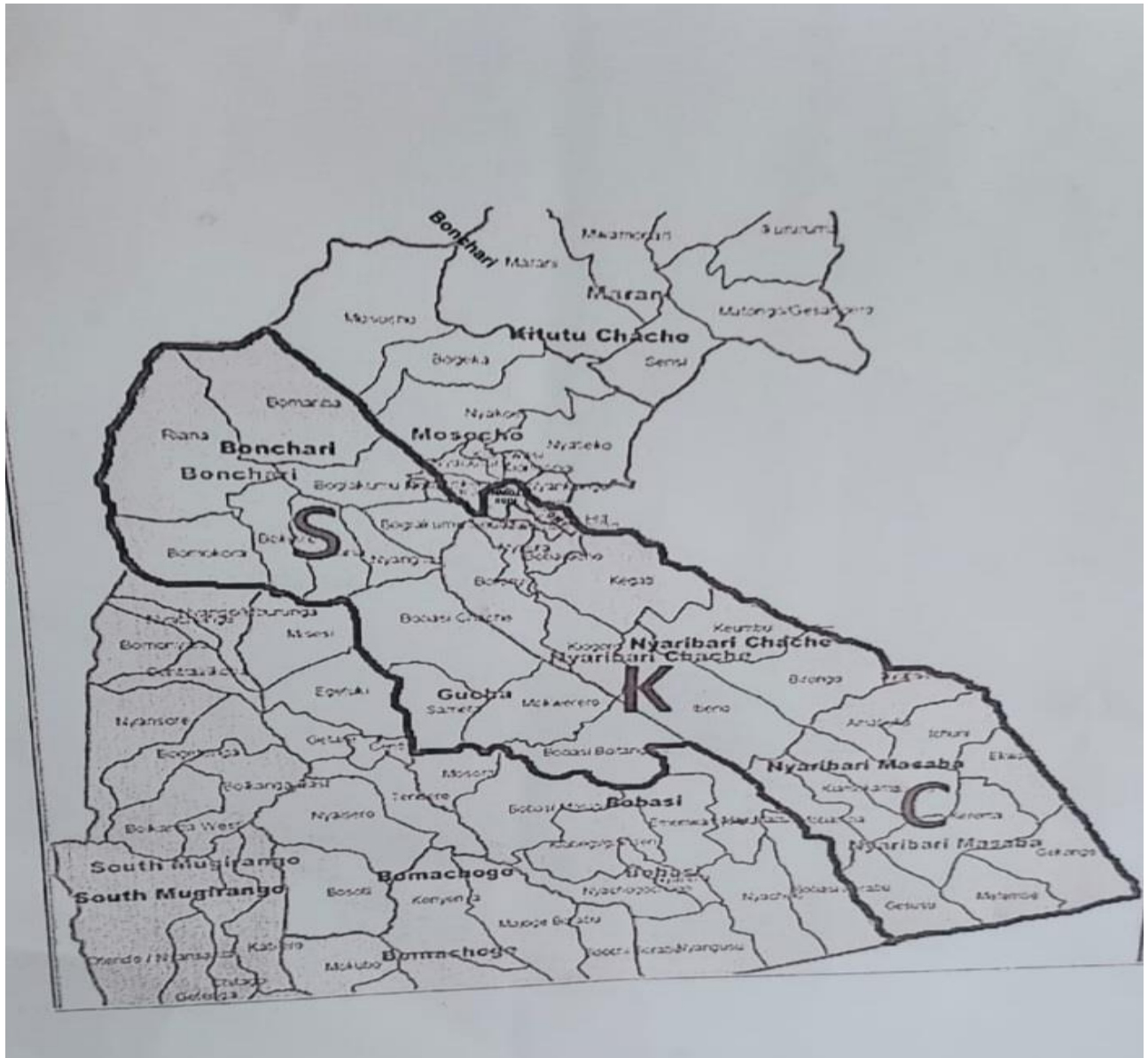
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**APPENDIX V: LETTER OF AUTHORIZATION TO DO RESEARCH FROM  
SDA SOUTH KENYA CONFERENCE, KISII**



**APPENDIX VI: MAP OF LOCATION OF SDA SOUTH KENYA  
CONFERENCE, KISII**



**Source: SOUTH KENYA CONFERENCE, 2018.**

## APPENDIX VII: PLAGIARISM REPORT

### IMPLICATIONS OF THE SEVENTH DAY ADVENTIST (SDA) CHURCH TEACHINGS ON LEVIRATE PRACTICE AMONG ABAGUSII OF ITUMBE STATION, KENYA

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