

Bifurcated Agency: Personal Decision-Making Styles Adopted by Widows in Nyakach Sub-County, Kisumu County, Kenya

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the decision-making processes of widows in Nyakach Sub-County, Kisumu County, Kenya, alongside the contextual factors influencing these choices. Employing a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, data were collected from 300 widows engaged in an initiative spearheaded by the Kenya Legal and Ethical Issues Network on HIV and AIDS (KELIN). Using Yamane's (1967) formula, participants were drawn from a sampling frame of approximately 1,200 widows through stratified purposive sampling, and the quantitative data were triangulated with semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Consultative decision-making was the most frequently reported style, adopted by 42.3% of widows, followed by dependent decision-making at 36.0%; only 12.0% of widows reported deciding entirely on their own. Autonomy varied sharply across life domains: 85.3% of widows exercised full control over everyday household tasks, yet none (0.0%) reported autonomy over land or property. In addition, 81.0% of widows reported that they often or always suppressed their own preferences to conform to community expectations. These patterns were interpreted through Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2014), Jack's (1991) theory of self-silencing, and Ryff's (1989) concept of environmental mastery. The findings suggest that widows' decision-making styles are not fixed personal traits but appear to shift with the social stakes of the decision at hand: independent action was concentrated in domains that posed little threat to patrilineal interests, while consultative behaviour in higher-stakes domains appeared, in the accompanying qualitative accounts, to function more as a display of deference than as genuine information-seeking. These findings carry implications for how decision-making is understood in relation to the psychological well-being of widows in patrilineal societies.

Keywords: Decision-Making Styles, Widowhood, Self-Silencing, Social Cognitive Theory, Environmental Mastery, Bifurcated Agency, Nyakach, Kenya

INTRODUCTION

Decision-making style is often treated as a personal trait reflecting how an individual typically gathers information and chooses among options (Rowe & Boulgarides, 1983). When applied to widows in sub-Saharan African societies, however, this trait-based view risks overlooking an important dynamic: decision-making is shaped not only by personal preference but also by social structures that permit or restrict which choices a person is allowed to make. Prior analysis of widows in Nyakach Sub-County indicates that they rarely make major decisions independently. The present study extends this observation by asking: when widows do participate in decision-making, how do they do so? In which domains of life are they permitted to exercise autonomy? And what is the psychological cost of that participation? This paper is drawn from a larger doctoral investigation into the decision-making dynamics and psychological well-being of widows in Nyakach Sub-County. The study specifically aims to: (1) identify the primary decision-making styles employed by widows; (2) analyze the contextual variation of these styles across distinct life domains; and (3) assess the degree to which widows prioritize community expectations over personal autonomy and preference. Widows' decision-making approaches are grouped into five types: independent, consultative, dependent, directive, and conceptual. These styles are examined through three lenses: Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2014), constrained-agency

scholarship, and Jack's (1991) theory of self-silencing. Together, these frameworks help explain how structural forces shape the way widows decide, and how they manage their experience of that process.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study drew on Bandura's (2014) Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), which conceptualizes human functioning as a triadic, reciprocal relationship between personal factors, behavior, and environment, including the outcome expectations that shape whether a person acts. This was read alongside Jack's (1991) silencing-the-self theory, which explains how individuals suppress their own preferences to preserve relationships and avoid conflict, and Ryff's (1989) concept of environmental mastery, which treats the capacity to shape external conditions to meet one's needs as a core component of psychological well-being. Together, these frameworks frame decision-making style not as a fixed and uniform trait, but as behaviour that shifts with anticipated social consequences.

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently, analyzed independently, and merged during interpretation. This design was selected because neither strand alone could fully answer the study's questions: the quantitative strand established the prevalence and domain distribution of decision-making styles, while the qualitative strand illuminated the lived experience and meaning behind those patterns.

3.2 Study Population, Sampling Procedure, and Eligibility Criteria

The target population comprised approximately 1,200 widows enrolled in the KELIN (Kenya Legal and Ethical Issues Network on HIV and AIDS) initiative in Nyakach Sub-County, Kisumu County, from which a sample of 300 widows was drawn through stratified purposive sampling. The specific strata used were the four administrative wards of Nyakach Sub-County: North Nyakach, Central Nyakach, South East Nyakach, South West Nyakach, and West Nyakach. The second variable was the length of widowhood, divided into five categories (1-5, 6-10, 11-15, 16-25, and more than 26 years) to reflect differences in decision-making experience at various points in the widowhood journey. The third factor was age, divided into five categories (18-25, 26-30, 31-40, 41-50, and 51 years or older). Allocation among strata was established proportionally, utilizing demographic distributions from KELIN's program registers, thus guaranteeing representative coverage across geographic and widowhood-experience dimensions.

Eligibility for inclusion required that a participant: (a) self-identified as a widow; (b) was aged 18 years or older; (c) was actively enrolled in the KELIN initiative in Nyakach Sub-County; (d) had resided within the sub-county for a minimum of 12 consecutive months, and (e) was able and willing to provide informed consent. Widows who were unable to provide informed consent due to cognitive impairment, or having remarried and no longer self-identifying as widowed, were excluded from the sample.

The sample size was calculated using Yamane's (1967) formula, $n = N / [1 + N(e)^2]$, where N is the population size (1,200) and e is the margin of error (0.05), yielding a minimum required sample of approximately 300 respondents, which was adopted as the final sample size.

3.3 Participant Characteristics

Table 1 below summarizes the demographic profile of the 300 participants, including age, level of education, duration of widowhood, and number of dependents. The narrative summary indicates that the majority of participants were aged between 36 and 50 years (48.0%), had attained primary-level education (62.7%), had been widowed for 4 to 6 years (41.0%), and were caring for 3 to 4 dependents (53.4%).

Table 1: Demographic and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 300)

Characteristic	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Age (years)		
18-25	20	6.7
26-30	32	10.7
31-40	33	11.0
41-50	85	28.3
51 and above	130	43.3
Level of Education		
Primary	159	53.0
Secondary	93	31.0
Tertiary college	37	12.3
University	11	3.7
Duration of Widowhood		
1-5 years	72	24.0
6-10 years	90	30.0
11-15 years	54	18.0
16-25 years	31	10.3
26 years and above	53	17.7
Number of Children		
0-2	25	8.3
3-5	138	46.0
6-8	106	35.3
9-12	31	10.3
Livelihood / Main Occupation		
Subsistence farming	155	51.7
Informal business/trade	67	22.3
Formal/professional employment	59	19.7
Casual/unpaid labour	19	6.3

The sample favored older women, as 71.6% of participants were 41 years or older, while around 17% were 30 years or younger, aligning with the trend in which widowhood in Nyakach Sub-County generally occurs after marriage and childbearing instead of taking place in early adulthood. Educational levels were similarly low: 84.0% of respondents had finished just primary or secondary education, while only 16.0% had achieved higher education or university qualifications, a trend that significantly affects widows' ability to comprehend and claim legal property and inheritance rights in a setting where traditional practices, including the chi liel designation, hold substantial sway. The duration of widowhood was primarily focused in the initial post-bereavement phase, with 54.0% of participants having been widowed for ten years or less, indicating that the limitations on decision-making noted elsewhere in this study significantly mirror experiences that are still actively occurring rather than completely resolved adaptations; the other participants, who have been widowed for eleven years or longer, show that these structural constraints continue well after the intense post-bereavement stage. Household sizes were considerable, averaging 5.5 children per respondent, with the most common grouping being five children (n = 60). This illustrates significantly high dependency ratios, which intensify the economic and caregiving challenges faced by widows, who largely do so without a cohabitating income provider. Livelihoods were similarly informal and unstable: 51.7% of participants depended on subsistence agriculture and an additional 22.3% on informal commerce, whereas just 19.7% had formal or professional jobs

Quantitative Instrument: Development and Validation

Quantitative data on decision-making style and domain-specific autonomy were collected using a structured questionnaire. Items assessing decision-making style were adapted from Rowe and Boulgarides's (1983) five-

category decision-style typology (independent, consultative, dependent, directive, and conceptual), and items assessing domain-specific autonomy were developed to reflect four life domains identified in the widowhood literature as salient to this population: daily household management, children's welfare, informal business or trading, and land and property matters.

Three subject-matter experts (two doctoral-level lecturers in Counselling Psychology and one sociologist focused on gender and development) evaluated the item pool for content validity and made refinements as needed. The tool was tested with 30 widows selected from beyond the final sample in the nearby Central Nyakach region, leading to adjustments in item wording and response options for better clarity. The decision-style subscale's internal consistency reliability was evaluated via Cronbach's alpha, resulting in a satisfactory coefficient of $\alpha = 0.79$ for the pertinent subscales.

Qualitative Data Collection Procedures

Semi-structured personal interviews were carried out with 15 widows, intentionally chosen from the quantitative sample to reflect differences in reported decision-making styles and levels of domain autonomy. Furthermore, two focus group discussions took place throughout Nyakach Sub-County, with each group consisting of 8 to 10 participants, and were held in convenient community centers located in the North, South, Central, and West Nyakach wards.

Interview and focus group guides were created based on the study's theoretical framework (social cognitive theory, self-silencing theory, and environmental mastery) and the areas identified in the quantitative instrument, and they were tested before complete data collection. Sessions took place in Dholuo, the native language of the widows, audio-recorded with the participants' approval, transcribed word for word, and translated into English; back-translation was employed to verify conceptual equivalence between the Dholuo and English versions.

Data collection persisted until thematic saturation was achieved, defined as the moment when three sequential interviews yielded no fresh codes, and no significantly new codes arose from further transcripts.

Qualitative Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Qualitative data were thematically analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step method: becoming acquainted with the data, creating initial codes, identifying themes, evaluating themes, defining and labeling themes, and generating the final analysis. Two researchers independently performed coding using NVivo 12 software, evaluating inter-coder agreement to verify consistency, and resolving discrepancies through discussion to enhance coding reliability.

Trustworthiness was evaluated according to the criteria set by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was enhanced by performing member-checking of initial themes with a selected group of participants. Trustworthiness was upheld by keeping a record of analytical choices from the beginning of coding to the conclusion of theme formulation. Confirmability was enhanced by using reflexive memoing to bring to light and set aside the researcher's personal assumptions during the analysis. Transferability was enhanced by a detailed, contextualized account of the study environment and the participants' situations, enabling readers to evaluate the relevance of the results to other patrilineal settings.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Strands

In line with the convergent parallel design, the quantitative and qualitative components were examined separately and integrated at the interpretation stage using a joint display, where the frequency distributions for decision-making style and domain-specific autonomy (Tables 2 and 3 in the Results section) were compared with relevant qualitative themes and supporting excerpts. This combined presentation was utilized to pinpoint areas of alignment; for instance, the almost complete lack of quantitatively reported autonomy regarding land was supported by the qualitative theme of nearly universal family veto over land-related choices. It also highlighted areas of expansion, where qualitative narratives elaborated on the social role of consultative

decision-making (as a sign of respect) in ways that the quantitative classifications alone failed to convey. Divergent instances, in which a participant's numerical response conflicted with the content of her interview or FGD account, were kept and analyzed instead of being addressed by eliminating either data source.

Ethical Considerations

The research obtained ethical authorization from the Institutional Ethics Review Committee at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA) (Ref: CUEA/IREC/2023/045), and national-level approval was secured from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) under Research Permit No. NACOSTI/P/23/14568. Permission to conduct the study was also sought from the Deputy County Commissioner of Nyakach Sub-County (Ref: NYK/EDT/16/VOL,06(181)), under whose jurisdiction the participants resided. Together, these procedural steps placed the study within the framework regulating scientific research in Kenya, affirming its institutional legitimacy and compliance with national research governance standards.

All participants provided written or witnessed oral informed consent (for those with limited literacy) before data collection, after being fully informed about the study's purpose, methods, voluntary nature, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality was ensured by anonymizing transcripts, employing participant codes (e.g., W1–W300) instead of names, and securely storing all audio, transcripts, and questionnaire data with password protection.

RESULTS

Distribution of Decision-Making Styles

Participants were asked to specify how they usually made decisions regarding themselves and their families. Table 1 indicates that consultative decision-making, in which advice is sought but the final choice rests with the widow, was the most prevalent style, reported by 127 widows (42.3%). Dependent decision-making, characterized by full surrender of decision-making authority to another party, was reported by 108 widows (36.0%). Only 36 widows (12.0%) reported deciding entirely on their own, while 29 (9.7%) gave other or unclear responses.

Table 2: Decision-Making Styles Among Widows (N = 300)

Decision-Making Style	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
I decide independently	36	12.0
I seek advice but make the final decision myself (Consultative)	127	42.3
I rely on others to make decisions for me (Dependent)	108	36.0
Other / Unclear response	29	9.7
Total	300	100.0

The prevalence of consultative and dependent styles suggests that participation in decision-making, when it occurred, was primarily shaped by social expectation rather than by independent preference. This pattern aligns with Nabayinda et al. (2025), who found that young women in Southern Uganda were systematically positioned as "guests" within patrilineal households, holding nominal membership while lacking genuine control over resource distribution. Lecoutere and Chu (2024), in a mixed-methods field experiment in rural south-west Tanzania, similarly found that imbalanced intra-household decision-making authority persisted despite a gender-transformative intervention, while Cheptoo, Sorre, and Bor (2024) identified comparable elder-dependent hierarchies within the Nandi community of Kenya. The present results extend this body of work by suggesting that, for widows specifically, the loss of a spouse does not appear to confer greater decision-making autonomy but may instead reinforce subservience to family hierarchy through the appointment of *chi liel*, positioning the widow more firmly within her late husband's family than she was during his lifetime.

Domain-Specific Autonomy: Daily Survival versus Strategic Resources

To map the boundaries of autonomy, respondents identified domains in which they could exercise decision-making without interference (Table 3). A marked contrast emerged: 256 widows (85.3%) reported full autonomy over household tasks, and 189 (63.0%) over children's day-to-day care. A smaller share, 112 widows (37.3%), reported full autonomy over minor informal business or trading. No respondents (0.0%) reported autonomy over land and property.

Table 3: Domains of Independent Decision-Making Among Widows (N = 300)

Domain of Decision-Making	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Daily household management (food, chores)	256	85.3
Children's daily welfare (school attendance, health)	189	63.0
Minor informal business/trading	112	37.3
Land and property matters	0	0.0

The complete absence of reported control over land and property is analytically notable, and appears more consistent with a structural constraint than with a mere statistical anomaly. This pattern reflects a wider trend observed across sub-Saharan Africa, where formal legal protections for women's land rights do not reliably translate into tenure security, as customary systems continue to govern the actual distribution and inheritance of land at both household and community levels (Doss & Meinzen-Dick, 2020). Natasya and Matsuoka (2025), studying West Sumatra, found that even where women nominally hold land in matrilineal societies, the practical authority to decide about that land often remains with male relatives, suggesting that the separation of ownership from decision-making power may be a broader structural pattern rather than one unique to patrilineal contexts.

Open-ended responses illustrated this boundary directly:

"I decide on small things like what to cook, but for land and property, the family must agree."

"For daily life, I am on my own; I just think and act depending on what we need at that moment."

"No one interferes with my daily choices; I alone decide what the children will eat."

Focus group participants reinforced these accounts:

"No one interferes with daily choices, only big matters... For daily life, I am on my own." (Participant W9) "I decide what my children will eat and what we will use in the house each day." (Participant W4)

"I can decide on small things like what to cook or buy for the house." (Participant W2)

This pattern of bifurcated agency, functional domestic sovereignty coexisting with the absence of strategic authority, resembles the directive decision style described by Rowe and Boulgarides (1983): quick, clear decisions that work best in familiar settings. The Nyakach data suggest that this quick, clear behaviour is not simply a personal preference but appears rule-governed: widows act independently and swiftly mainly when their actions are not perceived as a threat to family interests. Wilke et al. (2025), evaluating an empowerment program with adolescent girls in Nairobi, observed a related pattern: participating girls spoke up more in socially risky situations outside the home, such as meeting strangers, but showed little corresponding change within the household. Within the present sample, autonomy over daily domains may still support widows' sense of control over immediate aspects of their lives (Ryff, 1989).

Suppression of Personal Preference to Conform to Communal Expectation

Respondents reported how often they suppressed their own preferences to align with family or community expectations (Table 4). Most participants, 243 widows (81.0%), reported suppressing their preferences always (35.0%) or frequently (46.0%); only 57 (19.0%) reported doing so rarely or never.

Table 4: Frequency of Suppressing Personal Decisions to Conform to Culture (N = 300)

Frequency of Suppression	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Always	105	35.0
Frequently	138	46.0
Rarely	42	14.0
Never	15	5.0
Total	300	100.0

This widespread pattern aligns with what Jack (1991) calls self-silencing: the mental and behavioural suppression of genuine preference to preserve social bonds and avoid conflict. A thirty-year synthesis of self-silencing and depression research (Jack, Brody, & Sikov, 2026) found that conventional gender roles and social inequality foster cognitive and relational patterns oriented toward relational safety and conflict avoidance, which appear to increase vulnerability to depression through the sustained suppression of thought and emotion and an emphasis on others' needs over one's own.

Open-ended accounts conveyed the felt experience of this suppression:

"My heart tells me one thing, but the culture dictates another, so I follow culture to avoid trouble."

"I wanted to sell a piece of land to pay school fees, but the family refused, so I had to obey."

"Sometimes I want to make my own choices, but the community forces me to follow their way."

Focus group discussions revealed the psychological toll of navigating this tension:

"When I do something, I do it because that is what my heart desires... but that other person [the community], he saw me, I saw him, the way he is nowadays, he has changed." (Speaker 7)

"Even when I want to decide quickly, I must first think about what the family will say." (Participant W6)

"I ended up not being inherited... I am still in the church. But it was a difficult choice against the family." (Speaker 1)

These accounts illustrate elements of the conceptual decision-making style, characterized by a tolerance for ambiguity and a tendency to generate alternative solutions (Amzat et al., 2025). However, this style among Luo widows appears constrained by established norms of widowhood, as departure from mandated cleansing, inheritance, and ritual duties has been associated with stigma, isolation, and diminished social status for women in this context (Odhiambo et al., 2025).

DISCUSSION

The finding that 42.3% of participants used a consultative style and 36.0% used a dependent style indicates that decision-making style was not uniform across the sample. A sharp contrast emerged between the domain of household matters, where 85.3% of widows reported autonomy, and land, where 0.0% did. In addition, 81.0% of widows reported that they did not usually make their own decisions when preferences diverged from community expectation. Taken together, these findings suggest that decision-making among widows in this sample is better explained by the structural features of their situation than by a fixed personal trait. The same widow who decides what her children eat may be entirely dependent when it comes to land. This situational variation is difficult to reconcile with an account of decision-making style as a stable, unchanging characteristic of the person.

Based on Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2014) and the accompanying qualitative accounts, the consultative style observed here appears, on the basis of the accompanying qualitative accounts, to function partly as a

performance of respect for male authority rather than solely as a genuine effort to gather advice. When widows explained that they consult elders "so that they don't say I am disrespectful," the act of consultation seems oriented toward meeting social expectations as much as toward obtaining substantive input. Manor (2025), studying widowhood as a disruption of the gender contract, found that the space within which widows may decide is shaped less by their own preferences than by what male family members permit. Nazneen (2023) similarly found that women's decision-making under male-dominated authority structures is better understood as maneuvering within constraints than as direct, unconstrained choice. Fasanmi and Ayivor (2021) further suggested that the loss of control experienced in widowhood can, over time, become internalized in ways that reshape a widow's sense of her decision-making capacity.

Theoretically, the data appear consistent with a state of diminished reciprocal determinism within SCT's triadic model, in which environmental constraint predominates, and personal and behavioral dimensions are correspondingly narrowed toward reactive responses. Self-efficacy appears present in the sense that widows understand their own preferences, but they may be unable to act on them consistently without prior elder approval. Outcome expectations appear well defined: participants associated autonomous action with social repercussions, and this predictability itself may reinforce continued deference. The feedback pathway through which personal agency would ordinarily reshape environmental conditions appears constrained by the *chi liel* designation, which curtails the widow's standing as an independent decision-maker within her late husband's household. Ward (2025), in a phenomenological study of depression and self-efficacy among widows, found that environmental enablement was necessary for self-efficacy to translate into functional agency, a pattern broadly consistent with the present findings.

This bifurcated pattern of agency, operational authority in domestic matters alongside the absence of strategic authority, resonates with Ryff's (1989) concept of environmental mastery, which holds that psychological well-being depends not only on internal self-regard but also on meaningful control over the material and social resources relevant to consequential decisions. Read in this light, the consultative and dependent styles common among Nyakach widows may be better understood not primarily as individual choices or cognitive limitations, but as adaptive strategies suited to a structurally constraining environment; this interpretation, however, would benefit from confirmation through further longitudinal or comparative research rather than being treated as established.

The integration of the two data strands (see Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Strands, above) reinforces this reading: the numerical near-absence of land autonomy and the qualitative theme of uniform family veto over land decisions converged consistently across participants, while the qualitative material added interpretive depth, most notably around the social function of consultation, that the survey categories alone could not have revealed.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The study found that widows in Nyakach Sub-County predominantly use consultative and dependent decision-making styles, retain substantial autonomy in everyday household matters, but report almost no autonomy over land and property, and frequently suppress their own preferences to align with community expectations. These findings suggest that decision-making style, at least in this population, functions less as a fixed personal characteristic and more as a context-dependent behaviour shaped by anticipated social consequences. In clinical practice, counselling interventions may need to address the psychological toll of sustained self-silencing rather than treating consultative behaviour as an inherently benign or protective norm. Efforts to strengthen widows' strategic autonomy, particularly regarding land and property, are unlikely to succeed through individual-level empowerment alone and may need to engage lineage and elder structures that currently grant or withhold decision-making authority. The domain-contingent variation identified here provides an empirical basis for further examining the relationship between decision-making style, self-silencing, and psychological well-being among widows, and invites comparative research in other patrilineal settings to test the broader applicability of this bifurcated-agency pattern.

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