

INFLUENCE OF WIDOWHOOD PRACTICE ON PSYCHO-ECONOMIC WELFARE OF THE WIDOWS IN RURAL COMMUNITIES OF IMO STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

*The travails of widows in Imo State include a long period of incarceration during mourning, an obligatory poor standard of hygiene, deprivation of the husbands' property and maltreatment by his relatives, enforcement of persistent wailing and sitting beside the husbands' corpses. These directly have negative psychological, financial, sexual and social impacts on widows. This article examines how the widows could be helped by family members and government to ameliorate these problems. The researcher adopts simple random sampling technique to select 200 widows from Isiala-Mbano and Ehime-Mbano local governments. The instrument used for the study was tagged Widowhood Practice Assessment Scale (WPAS) $r = 0.85$. Two research questions were raised for the study. The data collected were collated and analyzed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient. The result shows that widowhood practice has a significant influence on poverty among the widows ($r = .574^{***}$, $N = 200$, $P < .01$). There is positive influence of widowhood practice on psychological well-being of widows ($r = .469^{**}$, $N = 200$, $P < .01$). However, based on the findings, it was recommended that Nigerian lawmakers should legislate against all oppressive, injurious and degrading widowhood practices.*

Key words: Culture, psycho-economic welfare, widowhood practice and widows in rural communities.

Introduction

The death of a husband is a tragedy that befalls the wife as it involves a physical break in their relationship and it is seen as a most stressful and devastating thing in life. It is a time when everything should be done to assist widows to withstand the emotional and psychological trauma, pain and frustration associated with this loss and not to add to widows' problems. But unfortunately the reverse is

the case based on unfavourable traditional African practices which subject the widows to more pains. Instead of helping the widows to ease themselves from their problems and live a better life, people choose the other way to maltreat the widows. The process of widowhood is believed to represent a life phase, which in the opinion of Porcino (2005), depicts one of the fundamental problems or losses

which the aged and by extension, the young people experience. Oniye (2000) views a widow from the perspective of her plight as a person who, by certain circumstances, is in distress. Thus, to him a widow is one who finds herself in the middle of the ocean of life, struggling to survive. Technically, a widow is a woman who survives her husband and has not remarried (Oniye 2000).

Abolarin (2007) defines widowhood as the state of mourning the loss of one's husband or wife as a result of death. The stress of this phenomenon is as real as those of loneliness and divorce. Widowhood is thus seen as a life event with wide range of consequences. Widowhood is known to be responsible for the poor health status of widows and widowers, with minimal long-term consequences (Ferraro, 2005).

One would have thought that the pains of losing a husband or a bread winner and the head of a family should be enough for a woman, and as such one would expect no more additional pain for someone who has been bereaved. However, this is not the case of widowhood in Nigeria. The womenfolk in Nigeria are subjected to varied harmful traditional practices and sexual abuses (Akande, 2011). Widowhood practices are those practices which are only limited to women. Men do not mourn their wives in the same manner. Hence, this practice which is rooted in superstition is a form of discrimination against women. Ede (2007) reports that these practices are not observed purposely to oppress and

intimidate women, but to ensure an honourable place in the hereafter, and guarantee for the widows and the living, respect among the in-laws and lots of blessing from the ancestors. These reasons are, however, grossly inadequate in the light of prevailing realities.

It is pointed out by Oloruntimehin (2001) that confinement is a common feature of mourning practice for widows in Imo state of Nigeria. He notes that while two-three weeks is the duration for employed widows, unemployed widows are expected to spend forty-days. The widow starts the second phase of her mourning by getting out early the next morning knocking the door of her neighbours to thank them for their care and concern. Traditionally, these neighbours are neither expected to reply nor show their face in acknowledgement. However, in some other parts of the western region of Nigeria, attribution of a husband's death is culturally made to the wife. In order to vindicate herself, she is expected to drink successfully from the water used in bathing the corpse of her deceased husband. Thus, according to Owosanoye (2007), the trauma associated with widowhood is a well-recognised phenomenon, especially, among women. These practices by all purposes and intent are contrary to universal religious injunctions. Regrettably, they are part of the discrimination against women generally in spite of the growing popularity of the legal principle that women rights are human rights (Olusakin, 1998).

The Effects of Bad Treatment on Widows

Certain repressive and dehumanizing acts against the bereaved, particularly, women who had just lost their husbands make widows suffer more with long lasting negative effect. In some cultures, a widow is to drink the water used to wash the corpse of her husband. They were subjected to this maltreatment in order to prove their innocence concerning the death of their husbands. Apart from this, a widow is not allowed to keep any of the husband's property. This ungodly act is often purported by the widow's brothers-in-law who out of greediness, want to inherit all the deceased properties by themselves without recognizing the widow who had been obliged to taking care of the children. Most of the time, the widows are not allowed to keep their own properties or joint properties they have contributed to acquire. A widow is frequently accused of being the cause of her husband's death. Benedict (2003) opines that the role of a widow everywhere has negative connotations. She is no longer a wife, and she lacks the security of a clearly defined status. Flanney (2005) asserts that some cultures treat widows as an inheritable part of the husbands' family and will not only want to inherit property of the deceased but also to inherit the widows as part of their brothers' property, This indeed, is very dehumanizing. In some places, it is also physical assaults like shaving the hair of the widows. All these bad treatments of widows have many negative implications on them. It makes the poverty rate of widows to be far above the average. It makes widows to live a life devoid of

peace and happiness. And finally, it makes widows feel inferior in all their dealings with other people and also make them feel in all their dealings with other people and also make them feel unwanted and rejected by all (Onyekuru, 2011).

Cultural Practice of the South-East on Bereavement

The cultural practices of the South-East (Imo, Abia, Ebonyi, Enugu and Anambra states of Nigeria) part of the country are similar in nature. It is the widow who suffers for the death of a spouse. A widower on the other hand does not suffer as much the same fate as the widow though both had lost a partner. According to Johnson (2008), at the death of a spouse, a widow, is dethroned, defaced and disinherited. Most importantly, the people of Abia, Imo and Anambra have unique cultural rites for the woman who has just lost her husband. The ordeal starts immediately the husband is pronounced dead. The dead man's family would quickly switch into action by demanding for the man's property and belongings. To ensure all compliance, they would force the widow to swear or take an oath that she has not or will not conceal any of her late husband's wealth (Onyekuru, 2011). Four kolanuts and one head of tobacco, two jars of palm wine and a white goat is then demanded from a woman who just lost her husband as rites. This is followed by the daughters of the community's continual rites. She is declared "Unclean" or "impure" because the death of her husband is a sign of ill-luck or bad omen and therefore, she is not expected to touch her children, anyone

around or any object around so as not to defile them. The daughters of the community (Umuada) may keep her in the same room with the dead body of her husband for several hours and sometimes she may be asked to lie on the same bed with her husband's corpse for some minutes if the widow has been known to be maltreating her husband (Onyekuru, 2011). As bad as it is, if it happens that the widow dies during the widowhood rites process, her corpse will not be dressed because her corpse will be seen as evil. The naked corpse will be covered with wood ash and her corpse will be buried in the "evil forest" as against being buried in her husband's compound. She is expected to wail every morning as early as 4.00 am before the people in the community will wake up. This is done as a sign of agony and pain for her departed husband for four days. Her failure to do so will attract very stiff penalty from the daughter of the community (Umuada). The widow is expected to sit on the bare floor during the period of mourning. She is also expected to wear only black clothes for one year after the four weeks of deep mourning. At the expiration of one year of wearing black clothes regularly, ceremonies must be performed before she is allowed to wear other clothes beside the black clothes.

Some obnoxious cultural practices are also most unhygienic. The practice that demands that the widow drink water that was used to wash her husband's corpse as a swearing to oath that she was not responsible for his death is a very big health risk. This may have a resultant effect if the bereaved has disabling chronic conditions. There is also a higher death

rate among the widows than their married counterparts. There are several instances of widows dying while observing widowhood rites and many dying after the rites. This has a combination of psychological, mental, social, emotional, health, spiritual and psychological trauma that the widows had to undergo.

Social isolation is very obvious during the mourning period of one year and after the widowhood rite. The widow is expected to wear only black clothes alone. She is not allowed to go to the market, church or attend social functions. The cultural rites increase the loneliness that the bereaved is already undergoing. It is a common saying that "loneliness kills". The widow is isolated at this period by everyone coupled with the economic hardship she has to deal with as most, if not all, of her belongings must have been confiscated by her late husband's family.

Economic Challenges associated with Widowhood Practices in South Eastern-Nigeria

When one considers the long mourning period associated with widowhood and the various traditional rites which widows face and the consequent denial of their fundamental rights to freedom among others, one is tempted to state that widows are by this practice, rendered economically incapacitated and this aggravates their poverty (Tayo, 2012). As part of the mourning rites, the widows in most societies in Nigeria are not allowed to return to work for months for as long as mourning lasts. However, the mourning duration varies from one tradition to

another. To corroborate this assertion, Olapegba and Chovwen (2007) opine that a widow that is confined, dethroned and disinherited may not see any support around her. It is obvious that these cultural practices which erode the dignity and self-esteem of the widows are counter-productive. In a similar vein, Aderinto (2000) reveals that a drop in the economic well-being of women accompanies widowhood. She adds that the situation is made worse when the woman has been deprived of access to her late husband's savings and resources.

Psychological Impacts of Widowhood Practices in South-Eastern Nigeria

Widowhood, though an inevitable status, has impact on the lives of people when it occurs. The death of a spouse can be one of the most stressful role transition which results in profound change in the status, stability and security of the woman. The death of the spouse results to a problem of re-adjustment. Most times, the widow suffers insecurity and wants, especially, with regard to the maintenance of the house and children. In the past, this role was a joint responsibility of the couple. The psychological impact on the surviving spouse who is deprived of the companionship of the dead may be the same all over the world, but the treatments meted out to widows differ among cultures. Lasebikan (2001) captures the situation of widowhood in her statement: "what the Igbo widows experience during widowhood are better imagined than experienced". Widowhood practices still exist in their bizarre forms in some parts

of the world including some communities in Nigeria. This is premised on the fact that widowhood practices that invade the privacy of widows and violate their fundamental human rights are glaringly enforced. Tayo, (2012) asserted that in many parts of Nigeria; widows are often debarred from enjoying any inheritance rights in property owned by their husbands. A widow thus loses her home, the land she has worked for subsistence as well as her household possessions (Oyekanmi, 2007).

Harmful widowhood practices such as confinement for several days and months no doubt result in the denial of freedom for the bereaved women just as their businesses and careers are stalled and sometimes lost due to long mourning periods. These rites vary from one socio-cultural group to another. The above assertion no doubt, paints a gloomy picture of widowhood in the Nigerian context. Ironically, other women in the community, especially, relations of the deceased husband are those who execute and enforce harmful cultural practices. Among the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria, these women are called the "Umuada sisters" which implies sisters in the family. This is the danger of the process of socialization or enculturation, that is, a by-product of gender relations. Such experiences again show that certain aspects of our culture inhibit development. The age long restrictions placed on women's life choices and opportunities hinder not only their growth but also the development of nations (Aina, 2007).

Statement of the Problem

There are several initial reactions to the loss of loved ones. The reaction is in most cases severe on the bereaved when the loss has to do with the breadwinner of the family who has played a central role in the lives of the wife (the widow) and the children as a whole. The psychological trauma may be very devastating. In Imo State, this could be as a result of personal grief of loss and other humiliating cultural practices that the widow has to undergo as rites of widowhood. Most widows also experience failing health due primarily to economic hardship and isolation.

In many communities of Imo State, widows are denied access to land, a vital production resource; and stripped-off of all inheritances from their spouses, except those having male children. When these occur, it becomes imaginable how such widows would cope with the vagaries of life. The question now is, does widowhood practice have significant influence on the psycho-economic welfare of the widows in rural communities of Imo State? Answer to this question warrants a study of this nature.

Objectives of the Study

The specific objectives of the research are:

1. to demonstrate that widowhood practices infringe on the rights of women, by using South- Eastern Nigeria as a case study.
2. to examine the extent with which widowhood practices affect the psychological and financial resources of the widows in South-Eastern Nigeria; and
3. to generate recommendations for legislation and policy interventions to

improve the status of the widows in South-Eastern Nigeria.

Research Questions

The following research questions were raised for this study.

RQ₁ :To what extent has the widowhood practice affected the economic welfare of the widows?

RQ₂: To what extent has the widowhood practice affected the psychological well-being of the widows?

Methodology

The study adopts descriptive survey research design of *ex-post facto*. This research design is adopted because the variables of the study are already in existence. Thus, the variables could not be manipulated because they are already in existence.

Sampling Technique

The researcher adopted simple random sampling technique to select 100 widows from the following communities Ogbor, Obollo, Ahara, Ugiri and Ibeme in Isiala Mbano Local Governments while 100 participants were selected from Nkeigwe, Nsu and Nzerem communities in Ehime Mbano Local Government of Imo state.

Psychometric Properties of the Instruments

The instrument used for the study was given to experts in the Department of Sociology and Psychology, the corrections pointed out by the experts were effected in the final draft of the questionnaire. This helps to ensure face, content and construct validity of the instrument. Three research assistants who lived among the people used for the study in Imo state were

employed to collect data from the respondents

The instrument was self-structured, as such pilot test was conducted in Etitim-Mgbidi community in Olu West Local Government in Imo State. Thirty widows from the community were used for the pilot study and the data collected were analyzed with Pearson Product Correlation Coefficient (PPCC). (WPAS) $r = 0.85$. This shows that the instrument is reliable because it measured what it was expected to measure.

Instrument

The instrument used for the study was tagged Widowhood Practice Assessment Scale (WPAS). This was based on modified four point likert scale; agree, strongly agree, disagree and strongly disagree.

Method of Data Analysis

The data collected were collated and analysed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient.

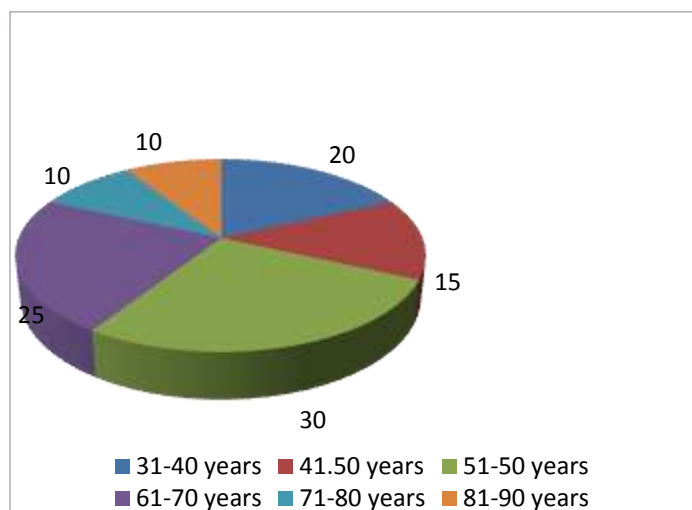


Fig 1: Pie chart showing the demographical status of the widows in Isiala Mbano and Ehime local governments of Imo state, Nigeria.

Result and Analysis

The pie chart above shows the demographic data of the widows interviewed in the two local governments in Imo state of Nigeria used for the study. The result shows that widows between the ages of 31 – 50 years are mostly affected

by the widowhood practice. The reason for this is traceable to the fact that the children of these widows are very young and they are not working to take care of their parents.

Result and Analysis

Correlation analysis that shows the influence of widowhood practice on poverty among the widows

RQ₁ :To what extent has the widowhood practice affected the economic welfare of the widows?

Variable	mean	Standard deviation	N	R	P	Remark
Widowhood practice	36.7650	9.8891	200	.574***	.000	Sig.
Influence on poverty	21.7750	7.5070				

It is shown in the table above that there is a positive significant relationship between widowhood practice and poverty among the widows($r=.574^{***}$, $N=200$, $P<.01$).

RQ₂ To what extent has the widowhood practice affected the psychological well-being of the widows?

Variable	mean	Standard deviation	N	R	P	Remark
Widowhood practice	24.4600	8.8891	200	.469**	.000	Sig.
Psychological well-being of widows	21.7750	7.5070				

It is shown in the above table that there is a positive significant relationship between widowhood practice and psychological well-being of widows ($r=.469^{**}$, $N=200$, $P<.01$).

Discussion of Findings

The findings reveal that the widows were exposed to different inhuman treatment by their in-laws and this often have serious implications on their health and psychological well-being. This correlates with the findings of Ede (2007), who asserts that women experience socio-psychological trauma, are subjected to harmful health practices, economic exertion and deprivations. Women are subjected to rough treatment by close relatives of the late husbands.

The study reveals that stigmatizing of widows often has tremendous effect on their mental well-being. This tallies with Zahedi (2006) who posits that widowhood entails emotional loss and change in lifestyle, identity, social status and role. It is also a period of intense emotional stress in which the woman who is bereaved is expected to express and handle her feelings of loss at that period before she starts to get over it and reorganize her life.

The study revealed that accusation and forceful acquisition of the deceased husbands' properties from the widows often aggravate their poverty and also make them suffer psychological trauma as a result of this. This correlates with Onyekuru (2011) who points out that at the death of a spouse, a widow is dethroned, defaced and disinherited. The result of the study reveals that widowhood rites include isolation and confinement, restrictions in movement and association and hair shaving, usually have serious

psychological effect on the women and this correlates with the study conducted by Akumadu (1998) who asserts that the widowhood conditions expose women to psychological and physical abuse as well as a whole range of health related problems including HIV/AIDs. It is difficult to achieve a good life by a widow when she has no right to inheritance. The study reveals further that upon the death of husbands, widows may be completely dispossessed and chased out and this deprives the widows of their homes and properties that belonged to their late husbands. This tallies with the report of Eweluka, (2002) who asserts that without inheritance rights, widows are automatically dependent on the seasonal charity of their husbands' relatives and friends.

The study shows that shaving of widows' hair and wearing of dirty rags as clothes has a major effect on their psychological feelings. This is in consonance with Onyekuru (2011) who states that other terrible practices may include asking the widow to drink the water that was used to bath the husband's corpse as a proof of her innocence if accused of being responsible for her husband's death. He points out further that it is their belief that if she contributed to her husband's death, some very terrible things would happen to her after drinking the water used to bath her husband's corpse. She may also be required to crawl

over the husband's corpse as a means of proofing her innocence of the husband's death.

In the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) conducted with a 65 year old woman in Ogbor community the widow laments:

I work in other people's farms for food or money. Any person who does not want to die of hunger and poverty will have to look for an alternative means of survival. Most of us are farmers. We plant crops that were traditionally planted by men. On my farm, I plant yam, cassava, vegetables and maize.

Conclusion

Widowhood practice is the most tragedy and hard luck that can befall a woman in life and it poses many cultural problems to a widow. In Imo state where the study was conducted, it was revealed that stigmatizing of widows often have tremendous effects on their mental well-being. Apart from this, forceful acquisition of the deceased husbands' properties from the widows often aggravates their poverty and this has inflicted psychological trauma on the widows.

Recommendations

However, based on the findings, the following recommendations were proffered.

1. Nigeria lawmakers should legislate against all oppressive, injurious and degrading widowhood practices and
2. Government should provide financial assistance to some widows, especially, at the rural communities, this can be achieved if they asked the widows to register with the local government very

close to their area of residence and they should also indicate their felt needs.

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