

# Widowhood and Its Harmful Practices: Causes, Effects and the Possible Way out for Widows and Women Folk

Dr. Adeyemo, C. Wuraola<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Adult Education, Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria

\* Dr. (Mrs) Adeyemo, C. Wuraola, E-mail: cwyemo@yahoo.com

Received: June 16, 2016

Accepted: June 27, 2016

Online Published: August 29, 2016

doi:10.22158/wjer.v3n2p380

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/wjer.v3n2p380>

## **Abstracts**

*This study investigates widowhood practices in Nigeria in Southwestern, Nigeria. It particularly examines the influencing factors for the harmful widowhood practices in spite of modernization. The researcher discovered that there are certain cultural imbalances in the practice of widowhood between widows and widowers. And that the disorganizing and traumatic experience which accompanies the death of the husband tends to be greater than that which accompanies the death of the wife. The study revealed that; illiteracy, poverty, male-dominated society, poor socio-economic status of women, religion belief and traditional inheritance laws are factors responsible for the harmful practices. These directly and indirectly have negative effects on widows and their children. This study therefore recommends qualitative education for the girl-child at early stage, enlightenment programmes and vocational skills acquisition for all women, particularly widows, as means of reducing, if not totally eradicated the harmful rites, unjust discrimination and inhuman treatments against widows and the generality of women.*

## **Keywords**

*widowhood, harmful-rites, girl-child, women-education, vocational-skills*

## **1. Introduction**

In Nigeria, like any other African Country, traditional practices like the issue of widowhood is still consciously and unconsciously upheld by significant proportion of the population. Widowhood is a tragedy that befalls a married person as a result of the timely or untimely death of the spouse, either the husband or the wife, making the survival a widow or a widower. Widowhood practices are observed by almost all the ethnic groups in Nigeria, particularly among the Yoruba, Igbo and Hausas. The culture of widowhood has been in existence from time immemorial and transmitted from generation to generation. The issue of widowhood, particularly in Nigeria, appears to have gender implication as there are certain cultural imbalances in the practices of widowhood by widows and widowers. Traditions are particularly

hard on widows because widowhood involves varying degrees of physical hardship, deprivation, ritual contaminations, emotional instability, socio-economic and psychological trauma.

In Nigeria, particularly in Southwestern part, the travail of a widow begins as soon as the death of her husband is announced. The in-laws immediately demands for the list of the man's property and bank accounts, after which she is subjected to series of rites and ritual practices to mourn the death of her husband. This involves torturing and dehumanizing the widow and making her to undergo series of rituals. Okoye (1995) summated that a widow is made to feel miserable, wretched and guilty over her loss. She is seen and treated as ill-luck goat to be avoided so that she does not infect other women. Oloko (2001) also reported that in different parts of the country, widowhood is associated with rituals and taboos, which are degrading and inhuman. Part of the ritual include the initial seven days confinement in a particular room, though where people could have access to her, putting on black or dark cloths and in most cases, having her hairs shaved. The proper mourning could last for three months initially, while the duration of wearing dark clothes ranges from three months to one year, depending on culture, religion and family position on the matter. Laolu (2000) confirms that a widow goes into confinement for seven days in which she is not allowed to go out, or take her bath or change her clothes, she is expected to sit on bare floor or a mat at best, only few influential and educated widows are being provided with mattress to put on the floor, this according to him is also subject to the kind of relationship existing between the widow and her in-laws. Of a fact, widowhood has not been a pleasant experience, but nature has made it a necessary lifestyle, consequence upon the death of the husband.

On further clarification, Fasonranti (2006) reported that in some Yoruba communities, a widow is expected to eat from broken plates and cook with broken pots, and on the seventh day, her hair is shaved to sever the bond between her and the dead husband. She is also expected to keep vigils and appears very sorrowful by wailing and crying profusely. If she fails to mourn, it is believed that she may become mentally deranged or forfeit the right to any benefit. After this, she goes into mourning proper, which could be for a period of three or four months (120 days) during which she is to be of impeccable behavior so that her late husband's spirit may gain quick entry into the community of his ancestral spirit. At the end of three or four months, a widow will performs the outing ceremony, which include being washed in the night after having the final wailing, making some rituals which are expected to finally put the spirit of the departed soul to final rest and performs the "outing" rites which involves changing of dresses and being led to the market. The outing rites also involve the widow going into an elaborate party which is referred to as "ijade-opo" to mark the outing. With this a widow will have to spend all she had left in shouldering the responsibilities of the ceremony. The widow then steps into the shoes of a provider, becoming the breadwinners of their family (Awoh, 2004).

On the inheritance right, the deceased husband's property is shared among his children. But if the family is a polygamous one, the property is shared among the number of wives he had, Olaniyi (2010). If on the other hand, the man left a will, his property will be shared in accordance with his will. A

widow in Yoruba Land does not have rights to inherit the husband's property, instead, Bamgbose (2005) considers women as part of the estate of their husband who is to be inherited by relatives of the husband. This brings in the issue of leverage in which a widow is handed over in marriage to her deceased younger brother, particularly if the widow is still young. An older brother, by custom, is never allowed the right of levitation of the demise of a younger brother. A widow who refused to cooperate with the family on this ground may be disowned together with her children and left alone to fend for themselves. It does not matter whether the union is blessed with children or not, a widow in Yoruba land is expected to go through these rites upon the death of her husband.

In other parts of the country, researches abound on the practices of widowhood. For instance, Ogundipe (2009) and Olaniyi (2010) provides overwhelming evidences on widowhood practices in Igbo culture of the South-Eastern part of Nigeria and the violence perpetuated against widows from relatives and family members. There, widows are kept in dark rooms for days and are sometimes deprived of access to food, they are forced to weep daily, sleeping on mats or old banana leaves, eating from broken pots, forced to drink the water used in bathing their husbands' corpse, they are compelled to mourn the husband with black clothes and also expected to allow the (Umuada) married daughter of the community to shave the hair on their head and pubic with razor blades, to prove their innocence in relation to their husband's death. Widows in this part of the country have to undergo certain traditional rites and practices which forms part of the deceased husband's funeral ceremony in other to show respect to the dead husband. In South-South Nigeria, particularly Delta State, Ewelukwa (2002) reveals that after the initial seven days confinement, additional 30 days is made mandatory for widows in a tinning hut. This is done to ensure isolation, restriction of movement and association with people. Also, in the culture of Birom in Plateau State, when a husband dies, he is buried within one week, the widow observes the Takaba, a four-month, ten-day mourning period in seclusion talking to no one and sitting in a place. She wears a sack and has a grass frond round her head, the sack or simple tarred clothe forms all the dressing of the widow. She remains in the house mourning until the male members of the family take a decision as to who will remarry the widow Okoye (1995).

On the contrary, widowers across Nigeria rarely go through these ordeals at the demise of their wives. From observations, they are not subjected to indignities when their wives die, they are not compelled to mourn, nor subjected to any of the dehumanizing experiences which widows go through. During the mourning periods, widower sleeps where ever he wants, though may be confined to a particular place, but they are allowed free movement within the house, they are not restricted from visiting certain places (Awoh, 2004). After the mourning period, they simply change the colour of their dress which they used for mourning their wives, whereas, it is a taboo seeing a widow during mourning period in any social gathering, cleansing must take place before she can re-unites with members of the family. Concerning the funeral ceremony, if such a man has a daughter that is married, instead of the man providing money for the wife's funeral, the in-laws are asked to do so. A widower in every culture is also free to remarry as soon as possible unlike the widow. It has been observed that some men even go

to the extent of having standby woman they marry shortly after the mourning period. These above facts reveals that widowhood practices is gender bias as widowers are not subjected to those dehumanising and degrading rites which their female counterparts are made to go through in Nigeria.

### *1.1 Factors Influencing Widowhood Practices*

However, there are notable factors influencing the unhealthy widowhood practices in every part of the country. The notable factors include: illiteracy, poverty, Male-dominance influence, poor socio-economic status of women.

#### *1.1.1 Poverty*

Poverty is the inability to live a decent life with respect to food, shelter, health care, and other social amenities. This is seen in the attitudes of most in-laws and villagers as they cling on to customs and traditions in the handling the deceased possessions. The poor relations always feel that the death of their rich relative is a golden opportunity for them in elevating themselves from abject poverty. This is seen in the show of affluence demonstrated during the burial ceremonies by some families. Some wicked relations usually force the widow and her children into emptying their deceased father's bank account, all in the pretence that the most befitting burial must be accorded their late brother. They see this as an avenue to lavish the late brother's money and to ensure that the widow does not remove any property from the dead man's house. It is therefore not surprising that the widow loses all her deceased husband's property to the male successor within the late husband's family. Poverty is also seen as the root cause of the insistence on lavish cooking and drinking part of widowhood rites in most places. The poor and the hungry relations see this as a golden opportunity to feed themselves at the expense of the widow. Attesting to this, Okoye (1995) confirms that the daughters of lineage with the belief of taking care of the widow within that period, brings their babies and hidden spoons in their handbags to feed as parasites on the widow within that period. These acts have pauperized widows and add to the suffering of the immediate family.

#### *1.1.2 Male-Dominance Influence*

Male-Dominance influence is yet another factor influencing widowhood practices in this part of the country. Maleness is usually associated with superiority, an attribute men ascribe to themselves as divine right and as a fact of natural selection (Okoye, 1995). Right from the time of creation, when the first human, Adam was created, and Eve was created as a companion for him out of his ribs, women have been treated as inferior sex. They are regarded and treated women as second class citizens, for instance, in the religious circle, the men hold firmly to the biblical details of the story of creation that woman was taken from the side of the man; therefore, the man stands out to be the real creature (Ahonsi, 1996). The man also determines the woman's personal physical, psychological and even emotional needs. The bible recorded that "a woman desired shall be to her husband, and he shall rule over her" Gen. 3:16b. Therefore, the man is given ample opportunities to acquire leadership qualities while the traditional role ascribed to women was to be the housewives and general helpers to their husbands.

Moreover, in a male dominated world, marriage is the only measure of attainment for women, this

explains why a woman worships her husband and calls him “my lord, and the husband is deified”. The divinity ascribed to the husband by culture influences the performance of rites and rituals such as impurity, defilement, cleansing and purification as well as period of seclusion when the man dies (Okoye, 1995). The male-dominance influences greatly the practices of widowhood. This is seen in way widowers remarried shortly after the death of their wives, while the widows mourn for months. Also, the act of bride price payment by men has made them regard women as commodities to be exchange with money or materials things. As the man paid the bride price, he owns the women in totality and she must under strict cultural demand mourn with all her heart and body, Okoye (1995).

#### 1.1.3 Illiteracy

Illiteracy status of majority of widows is also a significant factor responsible for the unhealthy widowhood practices in Southwestern Nigeria. In the time past, formal education for girls has been secondary to that of the boys. Women have been considered intellectual inferior to men. This is seen in the belief then that it is unwise to invest in the education of the female child because “the natural place of a woman is in the kitchen” (Okoye, 1995). This severe but general discrimination and neglect of the female child’s education hinders their progress and expose them to all forms of abuses and unhealthy cultural practices like the strict observance of widowhood rites. This has affected and still affecting women till date. Illiteracy status of women has really contributed to the plight of widows. The illiterate widows are particularly disadvantaged as illiteracy has rendered them socially and economically venerable. Olumukoro (2011) confirms that women’s illiteracy position perpetuates poor health, inadequate diet, early entering into motherhood, frequent pregnancies and continued cycle of poverty. Okonkwo (2004) further pointed out that illiteracy of widows in this part of the country has put them at disadvantaged position. According to him, it is illiteracy that would make a widow to be stripped naked and forced to lie with her husband’s corpse in a final embrace as a mark of severing all sexual relationship with the dead man and with the belief that this love-making between the widow and her dead husband will soothe the spirit of the dead man. Studies have also shown that widowhood rites and practices, meted on widows who are educated and have a means of livelihood are not the same as those who are less educated and are not economically empowered. The educated widows are economically empowered and are able to fight for their rights because of their financial capability Emewu (2003).

Babalola (1997) also pointed out that women who are in the best position to withstand the pressure to comply with widowhood rites are usually those who are educated and enlightened enough to challenge those trying to impose rites on them or wealthy enough to provide a sums of money in lieu of compliance. In the same vein, Adeyemo (2014) reveals that the issue of staying in-doors for a long period for mourning rites is more pronounced among illiterate widows than the educated once. While the illiterate widows are compelled to stay indoors for as long as it is required by the family of the deceased, the educated and working class widows will have to resume work latest three to four weeks after the incident. Evidence in this regard shows that widows who are educated and gainfully employed have sufficient resources to shield and secure themselves from any inhuman and degrading widowhood

practices.

#### 1.1.4 Poor Socio-Economic Status of Widows and Women

Another notable influencing factor responsible for the harmful widowhood practice, particularly in Southwestern, Nigeria is poor socio-economic status of widows and women generally. From all indications, widowhood remains an important risk for transition into poverty. For instance, the imposition of restrictive and extensive mourning rites, such as seclusion, dress code or feasting are all having great implications on the socio-economic status of widows. Also, the traditional barriers to access of land, capital, credit, employment, housing, and other means of livelihood also reduced the ability of widows to become economically secured. In a related manner, Ogundipe (2009); Olaniyi (2010) observes that during the mourning period a widow cannot engage in any economic venture nor do any personal work to earn an income. Added to this is the outing ceremony in which a widow is expected to make an elaborate party for the outing (“ijade-opo”) where she will have to spend all she had left, in shouldering the responsibilities. The economic effect of widowhood as raised by Ogundipe (2009) indicates that a widow automatically suffers the loss of marital expectations and security especially with respect to maintaining and raising the children, which would have been the joint responsibility of the couple. This is concomitant with the inability to pay children’s school fees; provide adequate food; secure good accommodation; meet children’s needs and maintain household. The reason for this, according to Anyanwu (2005), was that most women depends more on their husband’s earnings and so the death of the spouse marks the beginning of a terrible crisis for such women. With these, widows and their children have continued to suffer in this part of the country.

## 2. The Way Forward for Widows and the Generality of Women

On the way forward for widows and the generality of women, education, vocational skills acquisition and enlightening programmes have been seen in this study as antidotes to help widows resist those who may want to subject them to traumatizing widowhood rites. Education has been identified as a coping strategy for widows during the process of grief. Education depicts individual widow’s involvement in formal training for the purpose of acquiring basic knowledge, skills and expertise necessary for living a meaningful and impactful life. For widows to be free from all forms of abuses, Government, Non-Governmental Organization (NGOs) and religious body have some roles to play. They should invest more on the education of the girl-child. The government in particular re-affirms the girl-child is educated at an early stage of life so as to become empowered, enlightened and be able to fight for themselves, if eventually they found themselves in such state. Moreover, the illiterate communities should as a matter of fact be educated, particularly, on the way of handling the issue of widowhood. The government, through its agencies, legal practitioners, religious leaders as well as all stakeholders should educate the illiterate communities that are still hiding under traditional practices to inflict hardship on women through unhealthy widowhood practices to desist from the practice.

In addition to these, widows need to be economically empowered for them to be free from inhuman

rites and practices. This can be achieved through vocational skill acquisitions to expose them to all necessary economic opportunities as well as supportive services that can liberate them from unemployment, economic depression and poverty. Vocational skill is a highly useful system because its occupational content offers the trainees the opportunity to acquire skills, attitudes, interests, and the knowledge which they need to perform technologically and economically the job that is beneficial not only to them but to their society. Vocational skill makes it possible for widows and women generally to become employers of labour instead of an applicant or a job seeker and such widows automatically become empowered economically. On the importance of vocational skills (Chijoke, 2001) (Akpama & Arikpo, 2003), asserted that the products of vocational skills are well equipped to be job creators, self-reliant and employable. Also (Palma, 2005), opined that skill training is an important linked to increase in productivity, quality, diversity and occupational safety, as well as improvement in health and increasing in-come. Widows need vocational skills to liberate them from unemployment, economic dependency and poverty. Vocational skill has therefore been promoted as an antidote to poverty among widows.

In conclusion, it has been established in this study that among the implications of widowhood are the pathetic, degrading and dehumanizing rites that widows are subjected to. And for widows and women to be fully liberated, awareness programmes should be given to them to sensitize them to some facts, particularly on what widowhood entails. Therefore, it is a challenge to the society, i.e., the government, parents, women leaders, religious and opinion leader to sensitize widows and the generality of women about the negative impacts of widowhood.

### 3. Recommendations

- Widows need to be adequately educated; Governments and Non-governmental organizations, as well as religious bodies should be proactive and take up the responsibility of educating women so as to resist them from those who want to subject them to traumatizing widowhood rites.
- All stakeholders should embark on programmes that would empower widows through various skills acquisition programmes, for them to become self-reliant and take care of their immediate families as well as to contribute to the growth and development of the nation.
- Also, Governments and all other stake holders should embark on programmes that would enhance periodic information through enlightenment programmes for widows and the generality of women, particularly on the issue of widowhood.
- Women should be wise enough to encourage their husband's to write wills and also to formally concede properties to them while the man is still alive.

## References

- Adeyemo, C. W. (2014). Vocational Skills Acquisition and Micro-credit Loans as Determinants of Socio-Economic and Psychological Adjustments of Widows in Southwestern Nigeria. *An unpublished PhD Thesis*. University of Ibadan.
- Akpama, S. I., & Arikpo, A. (2003). Vocational Adult Education curriculum and unemployment reduction in Nigeria. *Journal of Educational Research*, 8(1&2), 63-74.
- Awoh, S. (2004). From grief to grace. *Adonai; Cakes and Balloons*. Victoria Island, Lagos.5: 53-54.
- Babalola, S. (1997). Discussion on society, culture and the status of widows in Contemporary Nigeria; Widowhood in Nigeria. In B. Owasonye, & B. Ahonsi (Eds.), *A Gender Analysis* (pp. 51-53). Freidrich Ebert Foundation, Lagos.
- Babalola, S. (1997). *Discussion on society, culture and the status of widows in Contemporary Nigeria*.
- Bamgbose, O. (2005). Transporting traditional concepts into legislation and practice: The Nigerian women focus. *International Journal of Africa and Africa American Studies*, 1(7), 62-77.
- Emewu, I. (2003). It's unfair to exclude women from inheritance. *Sunday Sun*.
- Fasoranti, O., & Aruna, J. (2007). A cross cultural comparison of practices relating to widowhood and widow. inheritance among Igbo and Yoruba in Nigeria. *Journal of World Anthropology occasional papers*, 111(1), 53-57.
- Laolu, A. (2000). *Coping with widowhood, the Godly way*. Lagos: Lafunmcall Ministries.
- Ogundipe, R. A. (2009). *Psychosocial Factors as Correlates of Adjustment among widows in Southwestern Nigeria* (Unpublished PhD Thesis). University of Ibadan.
- Okoye, P. U. (1995). *Widowhood: A natural or cultural tragedy*. Enugu Nucik Publisher.
- Olaniyi, C. M. (2010). *Problems of widowhood practice among Nigerian widows* (Unpublished PhD Thesis). Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti.
- Oloko, S. B. (1997). Discussion on panoramic view of widowhood in Nigeria. "A gender Analysis". In B. Owasonye, & B. A. Ahonsi (Eds.), *Widowhood in Nigeria, a gender analysis*. Lagos; Joint Publication of Friedrich Ebert Foundation and Human Development Initiatives. OVC Nigeria Ltd.
- Olumukoro, C. A. (2011). *Influence of literacy education programmes on socio-economic and psychological empowerment of women in Edo and Delta states, Nigeria* (Unpublished PhD). University of Ibadan.
- Opeke, R. (2003). *An analysis of information environment of women in Ukwani Local Government Area of Delta-State, Nigeria*.