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Widowhood and the Contending Odds in Africa: a Review

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to review the contending issues of widowhood in Africa with particular emphasis on Nigeria. Across different cultures in Nigeria, there exists harmful traditional widowhood practices that have attracted the attention of the global struggle especially on violence against women. Sufficient evidence suggests that, widows are often mal-handled by the society and thrown into financial, psychological, sexual and social trauma. The growing excess of widows in Nigeria is due to factors such as lower mortality rate among women than men, younger wives than husbands, wives with greater likelihood of outliving their husbands and higher remarriage rates among the widows than widowers. In the twenty first century, the clash of civilization reminiscent in culture and modernity has produced discernible patterns of decline in widowhood practices in all cultures in Nigeria. For instance, the factor of restricting a widow to a point of confinement is weakened by modernity and the economic demands of modern life. For an educated career widow, the return to work in an urban setting clearly negates the demand for respect for the rules of restriction in movement and association or interaction. Where the widow is perceived to be well educated and wealthy, the widowhood rights are observed more in breach than obedience. In the rural areas where widows may be illiterate, the demands of custom are more likely to be enforced with the presence of many pre-disposed to customary practices. The practice of widowhood rites has widespread negative effects and deeply ingrained social, psychological, economic and health implications for womanhood in Nigeria. From the little available literature, it is observed that, there is a high rate of widowhood among Africans especially in the crises prone areas of Africa such as Sudan, Liberia, Somalia, Sierra-Leone, Ethiopia, Eritrea, the Congo, Niger, Chad and recently Nigeria. Widows therefore, have to develop a thick skin to contend with the realities of the moment in the harsh environmental and ailing economies of Africa.

Keywords: Widowhood, Struggle, Societal View, Africa

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INTRODUCTION

Marriage in Nigeria is generally conditioned by traditional norms that are varied across cultures given Nigeria's complex ethnic plurality (Coleman, 1975). Nigeria is a country of more than 250 ethnic groups suggesting the existence of complex cultural peculiarities as relates to the institution of marriage. In the marriage market, therefore, exists a variety of cultural practices that underpin the phenomenon of widowhood. Once marriages are contracted customarily between a man and a woman, the families of both spouses are linked and parents of the husband or the extended uncles and male siblings become initial stake holders in the marriage to the extent that their views count in the marriage and upon widowhood.

In developed countries, substantial information on widows exist, especially in terms of age category and numbers of women in widowhood. These statistics are certainly absent or are available in uncoordinated and improper forms that are not easily accessible in the developing world. For example, it is estimated that there are about 7% to 16% of widows among women worldwide (Agena, 2008). In Nigeria as in many parts of the developing world, the exact number of widows is unknown and where some figure are available, it will be a matter of gross estimates. Besides, the ages of these women and much of their socio-economic conditions are poorly accounted for. Broadly stated, while widowhood is largely experienced by elderly women in the developed world, the reverse is the case in developing countries such as Nigeria where younger women, many of whom may still be bearing children, are widows. With early marriages still largely in practice in Nigeria, many girls given out in marriage are turned widows before adulthood. The objective of this paper is to review the contending issues of widowhood in Africa with particular emphasis to Nigeria.

Widowhood Rate in Nigeria

The phenomenon of widowhood is attributed to death of a husband which causes are varied. In contemporary societies like Nigeria, the first notable variety of death worth considering due to its profound and immediate impact on widowhood, in terms of creating many widows at a given time,

is war or armed conflict. World War I and II, the Ibo pogroms of 1966, the violent political crisis in Western Nigeria in the mid-1960s, the Nigerian civil war of 1967 – 1970, all produced more widows than any period in modern Nigeria (Agena, 2008). Ethnic and religious conflicts such as the Tiv riots of the 1960s; the Tiv-Jukun crises of the early 1990s and 2001; the Ife-Modakeke crisis of 2000, the Amuleri-Aguleri in South-Eastern Nigeria in 2001; the Maitatsine religious crisis of the 1980s that erupted in Kaduna and spread across Northern Nigeria with flash points in states like Kano, Bauchi and Plateau; the recurring religious-ethnic crises in Jos, Plateau State and Kaduna metropolis since 2000 have all combined to produce additional widows in huge numbers (Alubo, 2006; Hembe, 2003 and Anifowose, 1982). In between these are unreported cases of violent conflicts between minority ethnic groups that result in male casualties. Since 1999, the Niger Delta crisis, electoral related violence and the Boko Haram menace have caused substantial deaths of men in Nigeria. The group has carried out heavy attacks since 2007 in Maiduguri, Kano, the Police Headquarters in Abuja, churches in Abuja and Suleija in Niger State and at the United Nations house in Abuja, media houses in Abuja, Yobe State, Adamawa and Kaduna States (Onojovwo, 2012; Akogun, et al., 2011; Alli, 2012; Adamu, 2012). Without debate, majority of those who lost their lives in all these wars and crises and bombings are men, many of whom were married. Those left behind include widows and children in sizeable proportions.

A second variety of death in terms of impact on widowhood by way of rendering many women widows is that attributed to HIV/AIDs. Many married women have lost their husbands due to HIV/AIDs-induced deaths. Related to this are natural causes of death such as brief and prolonged illnesses other than HIV/AIDs as well as accidents of all kinds, especially in the road transport sector. Once upon the death of a husband, irrespective of the age of the wife, she descends into widowhood and depending on the cultural background of the marriage; the widow's conduct and activities are henceforth regulated by customary practices and norms (Agena, 2008).

Other factor responsible for this high rate of widows in Africa is the age difference between hus-

bands and wives especially in the traditional societies. Usually wives are far younger than their husbands and polygamy, which is fostered by the tradition and some religious practices, also encourages this great difference in age. The third factor is the low level of widows' re-marriage, because re-marriage is not a popular option in African societies. Many widows will rather stay single even when they are still young to avoid some negative names being attached to them. Barrenness is also a contributory factor because it encourages polygamy, so also is the absence of a male child in the family, so much importance is attached to male child that any home without a male child is considered doomed.

Widow's Rites in Nigeria

In general, according to Ewuluka (2003), widowhood rites include isolation and confinement, restrictions in movement and association and hair shaving. Among the people of Edo in Edo State in South Western Nigeria which consist of a variety of minority ethnic groups, conspicuous practices include a seven days period of mourning under restricted movement and association. Shaving of the head, eating from unwashed plates, compulsory wailing, and washing the dead man's body and drinking the water are some of the dehumanizing practices that widows are subjected to.

Among the Idoma speaking people of North Central Nigeria, the mourning period is imposed with heavy restrictions on movement of the widows. The mourning period however varies from community to community. Among the Tiv of Central Nigeria, a one-year period of mourning is imposed and the woman is expected to dress in white rather than black as it used to be the practice until the 1980s. In addition she would have her hair cut low and would further refrain from any form of sexual relationship during the period of mourning. These practices and persistence are in addition to the expectation that the woman should demonstrate considerable public grief over the death of her husband. In some cultures though, it is believed that the woman is usually responsible for the death of the husband, hence the practices are designed to elicit remorse, impose punishment on the woman as the perpetrator and also to purify the widow by means of those practices (Procino, 1985).

Among the Hausa-Fulani community where cul-

ture has an admixture of Islamic religious elements, mourning and purification rites are also imposed and adhered to. A Muslim widow in Kano undergoes a 4-month mourning period and observes reasonable number of days in seclusion. In Plateau and Bauchi States, Muslim widows observe 40 days of mourning and 30 days of seclusion which run concurrently. However, Christian widows in the North-East observe six months mourning without strict seclusion, confinement and ritual rites are and expected to dress in black for two weeks (though not very mandatory). After the six months mourning she is free to re-marry either from among the husband's brothers or somewhere else. They believe that every death is natural that is why rituals are not imposed on widows.

Among the Igbos of South-Eastern Nigeria, a widow's head is shaved immediately upon the death of her husband. In addition, a widow is expected to use sticks in scratching her body from time to time during the mourning period. Besides, she is restrained from washing herself. These practices are rooted in the belief that every death is unnatural. Therefore, a widow must pass through these rituals to prove her innocence and purify herself and at the same time protect herself from further defilement (Okoye, 1995).

At the death of a husband, the mourning period ranges from one week to a year with activities that differ from one community to another. In most Igbo communities, a woman is expected to dress in a mud cloth called "Ogodo Upa" for a period of seven days to one year, depending on the emphasis of the community. In other communities, a woman is expected to wail three times a day or once a day for three to seven days. In addition to the woman's hair being entirely shaven, she would sit on a mat in a black attire often surrounded by sympathizers and members of the clan for seven months during the mourning period (Breeze, 2012).

Among the Yoruba of South-Western Nigeria, widowhood practices are generally characterized by human greed, superstitious beliefs and religion (Afolayan, 2011). This assertion holds true for other ethnic groups in Nigeria as well. The extent and intensity of these practices are influenced by modernity, the teachings of Islam and Christianity and the economic status of the

widow. Among the Yorubas, widowhood in its raw cultural manifestation without the moderation of modernity, "is an enduring period of deep-rooted agony, exclusion, anxiety, as well as a period of restriction, isolation, trauma, insecurity and pain" (Afolayan, 2011).

These widowhood practices also vary from community to community throughout Yoruba land. In some communities, widows are required to recite incantations in a thick forest at night for the purpose of "self-cleansing". In other communities, Yoruba widows are compelled to drink the water used in bathing the corpses of their deceased spouses. They are also shaven and isolated. These rites bear affinity with the ones among the Igbo of South-Eastern Nigeria. The widow is expected to weep and wail loudly at intervals during the period before the burial of the husband. Many cultures in Nigeria share similarities in widowhood practices. Many of these major ethnic groups as Yoruba, Igbo and some minority groups such as the Tiv, Idoma, Urhobo, Isan and including those in Edo and Delta States observe a mourning period that differ only in degrees. This may range from a few days to a year. During this period the widows' appearance is distinct by dressing in white or black attire accentuated by a grieving expression. (Akumadu, 1998).

The Igbo's shave the widow's hair while the Tiv only cut the hair low. In most of the cultures, the widow is a suspect in the death of her husband and is made to undergo widowhood rites in atonement, purification and self-immolation. There are two other elements in widowhood practices that are widely shared; levirate marriage and dis-inheritance for the widow. After the mourning period, the widow in Yoruba, Igbo or Tiv ethnic groups is expected to re-marry to a relative of her late husband (Osarenren, 1998).

In general, this practice is on the decline due to modernity, Christian and Islamic religious influence and increasing levels of education among widows and their children as well as among the relations of the husband of a widow. Nowadays levirate marriages are no longer attractive and acceptable. The widow may remain un-married as long as she may choose relative to society's consideration of what period is appropriate. Sufice to note that levirate marriages are more plausible with women of child bearing age. While it is

a forbidden practice or seemingly unacceptable thing across many cultures in Nigeria for a relatively young widow to re-marry not long after the death of her husband, widowers are often hurried into another marriage. Where marriage may be slowed, the widower is permitted to engage in sexual relations with one or even more women. For a widow, the marriage market holds little or no prospects.

A similar level of discrimination plays out in terms of restrictions imposed by varying degrees of mourning especially in movement, appearance and social interactions as well as engagement in economic activities. While the widow is heavily restricted at all levels, the widower is free to move around and interact at different levels with little or no expression in dress or mien of mourning. Among the Tiv, the widower could be seen with the children in particular uniform dress on the day burial ceremonies are to take place. Thereafter, the widower may choose never to adorn the attire.

Another element that cut across different cultural practices is the question of inheritance. According to Nwogugu (1980) succession and inheritance among the Igbos revolves around the principle of primogeniture and is primarily patrilineal. Both rights to succession and inheritance flow to the eldest son or in the absence of any, to the brother. Where there are only female children, property ownership passes to the brother of the deceased.

Among the Yoruba people, property devolves around all children irrespective of age and gender. Where the eldest is a son, he takes over as the head of the family property. However, in the absence of male children, the female eldest daughter can assume inheritance (Ikeh, 1993).

Poverty and Widowhood Rites

One of the major negative effects of widowhood is poverty (Cooney, 1989). Nigerian widows like their counterparts elsewhere, especially in Africa and Asia, are a special social category that is scantily acknowledged in social policy but is potently vulnerable to psychological, socio-economic and health risks as a result of harmful widowhood practices. Many Nigerian widows are pauperized by widowhood practices. These practices drastically reduce the economic status

of widows upon the death of their husband. It is important to consider poverty in the elaborate and broad sense in which the United Nations conceives it. Poverty is beyond income and includes well-being or good life in multi-dimensional sense that comprises both material and psychological components. Well-being therefore, encompasses peace of mind, good health and safety, freedom of choice and action and being able to associate in a community. In a nut shell, wellbeing means a dependable livelihood and a steady source of income. It is difficult to achieve a good life by a widow when she has no right to inheritance. Upon the death of a husband, widows may be completely dispossessed and chased off (Afolayan, 2011).

Widowhood, therefore, deprives women of homes, agricultural land and other assets. Thus, without inheritance rights, widows are automatically dependent on the seasonal charity of their husband's relatives and friends. Upon the death of the husband and immediately after the burial, financial assistance may flow in torrents from friends of the late husband and immediate relatives relatively well off and from colleagues to either or both spouses where they work but declines slowly and peter out completely after a few months or a year. Really concerned friends or close relation(s) may offer to train one or two children in school as a way for reducing the burden on the widow. Poverty level of widows is exacerbated by factors of illiteracy and lack of education and training. Long drawn out, rigid and expensive burial rites further compound the economic condition of widows. Long periods of mourning with characteristic restrictions on movement and interaction restrain the poor widow from engaging in any creative income generating opportunities which may arise from initiating new social levels of interactions. Stereotyping plays a critical role in this process.

The poorest widows are those that are relatively old and frail with children and other dependents to cater for. Though modernity, Christianity and Islam are altering established perceptions, women in Nigeria across cultures are socialized into dependent and passive conditions. Where a widow is illiterate and lacked skills, she would be totally dependent on the husband upon marriage. Where she is a working career woman, the death of a husband signifies the loss of a de-

pendable source of income as her income alone would certainly not be enough to meet the needs of the family. Negative stereotyping accentuates the declining economic status of widows when the question of re-marriage is considered. Widows are less likely to re-marry than widowers, a dangerous and deliberating discriminatory gender dimension. Women are usually expected to marry men older than themselves. In the event of death, the widow is expected to wait for a relatively long time before she may re-marry to be able to access spousal financial support (Cooper, 1989).

As long as the mourning and waiting period to meet societal expectations last, poverty grinds painfully. In the case of the husband, he is hurried to re-marry and stabilize his social condition; while the widow may not re-marry at all. For many widows in Nigeria, the implications of poverty include withdrawal of children from school and the adoption of coping strategies such as engaging in exploitative informal work, engaging the children in child labour and hawking, begging and sex work. In a number of cases, sex work is discretely undertaken but no doubt remains an option.

Due to widespread violent conflict induced by ethnicity or religion as well as HIV/AIDs pandemic, Nigeria has recorded a dramatic rise in the widow population. To these widows re-marriage as an option and avenue to stable support is an exception rather than a rule. Faced with the reality of existence as widows two other effects ravage them: the loss of status and self-esteem and depression or stress. To the very extent that marriage is perceived as a symbol of success, upon the death of husbands, widows are moved from a category of success to losers. With the death of a husband, the social status of the widow is largely reduced and with it is the loss of self-esteem.

Closely related is the issue of loss of identity. Upon marriage and until recently, Nigerian women would change their names underlying the reality of a new identity which derives from the marriage as a vocation. With the death of a husband, widows are thrown into a crisis of identity and are no longer willing to identify themselves with reference to a deceased spouse. The declining economic, social and psychological con-

dition of widows generate three major negative emotions; anger, resentment and guilt. The restrictions imposed by the mourning period, the distinctive identity in shaving of the head and the compulsory appearance in white or black attire and the social isolation amplify the effect of dependence by a woman on a husband before his death. Disintegration after spousal death throws the woman off balance emotionally while social isolation and constraint in mobility and mobilization of resources in the face of wants or needs propels resentment accentuated by de-sexualization. This physical, material, social and psychological barriers faced by widows' result in frightening anger, resentment and sometimes guilt. Overall, a widow may gradually descend into depression due to stress.

Dehumanization and Marginalization of Widows in Nigeria

In different parts of Nigeria widows are treated differently according to their culture. In Abia State, widows are not allowed to come outside during burial of her husband and not allowed to see the body of her husband when the casket is opened for relatives to see (Gbennda, 1997).

According to Islamic Law, the widow should stay for three months period of legal purity or four months and ten days, during which she may not re-marry. In Hausa land it is five months; other vices against the helpless widow include making her sleep in the same unlighted room with the corpse of her dead husband and; girded with only a tiny strip of loin white cloth in the part of the middle belt. Amongst one tribe in the old mid-west, she is given a ritual pot to carry on her head. While carrying this pot, she is asked to confess her sins against the husband. She will be left in the ritual site and asked to walk alone from the eerie fetish spot. In another place, before the man is buried, the widow is stripped naked and made to have the last sexual intercourse with the man by lying with the corpse in a room all night (Abdusalam, 1997).

In Ideato local government area in Imo state, as soon as the man dies his widow has to sit on the ground and can only be allowed to call anybody by the use of a gong. This forced dumbness imposed on the widow by culture is subjected to a variety of interpretation (Olusakin, 1998).

Bad Treatment of Widows

These are acts against women who have just lost their husbands which make widows suffer even more. For instance, the widows are forced to drink the water used in washing the dead bodies of their husbands. They are subjected to this maltreatment in order to prove their innocence concerning the death of their husbands (Choi, 1992). Secondly, a widow is not allowed to keep any of her husband's property. This ungodly act is often purported by the widow's brother in-law which out of greediness wants to inherit the deceased's properties at all cost without considering the widow who had been obliged to be take care of her children. Most of the time the widows are not allowed to keep their own property or joint property they have contributed in acquiring. A widow is frequently being accused of being the cause of her husband's death (Lazarus, 1984).

Benedict, (1934) opined that, "the role of the widow everywhere has negative connotations. She is no longer a wife and she lacks security of a clearly defined status". Most of the time widows are frequently accused of being the cause of her husband's death. Some culture treats widows as an inheritable part of the husband's family. They will not only want to inherit property of the deceased but also to inherit the widow as part of their brother's property, which is absolutely dehumanizing. In some places, it is also physical assault like shaving the hair of the widow as if to say by so doing the dead husband will come back to life (flanny, (1935).

A world public opinion organization had polled 18 nations around the world which found a wide spread perception that, widows are treated worse than other women. Discrimination against widows appear to be a common phenomenon in many countries. In less developed nations, there are no women's rights and development and experts have long noted that the widow has trouble securing her property rights after her husband's death. The widow and her children will become impoverished, sometimes in extreme cases, by being stripped off her land or goods and being expelled from the household, which results to high rate of poverty among widows.

According to Asward (1967), a widow remains as an appendage of her husband family. Her loss is unenviable, especially if she is young and child-

less, for she has no one of her own to turn to and her life is spent as an unpaid servant within the family. In the past, women of high cast were burned to death on the funeral pyres of their husbands. Asward (1967) reiterated that, "this custom of suttee has long been outlawed, but the roles of widows was not ameliorated nor have the basic attitude of the Hindus towards widows changed. It is likely that, a widow will need the help and charity of the community even if she inherits the homestead and farm, she has to rely on her neighbors or kin to help her maintain it. All these bad treatment of widows has negative influence 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 their dealings with other people and also feel unwanted and rejected by all.

In the view of Chinas (1983), there are rare instances of very wealthy widows who choose not to remarry, acting as regents to keep the property intact for their minor sons. Asward (1967) describes such widows in wealthy land-owning lineages in some middle-eastern villages. These women never remarry, but assume control over their husband's property and take on the patriarchal role. In some cases, provided she lives long enough and has strong personality, a woman may retain economic and political control of the whole extended family, the grown-ups and their families.

Financial Obligations of Widowhood

Even if a husband provided for his wife, in the event of his death widows cannot always be sure that they will have access to that provision. A widow cannot even be sure that she will be allowed to keep the money and property that she herself worked for and earned. If an inheritance is available such as a house, cars, cattle or money, the widow's family-in-laws often lay claim to them. The widow herself can be inherited by a male member of her deceased husband's family. Forcing her to marry him, the family-in-law gains control of the property and children. In many cases with the absence of a 'will' the family-in-laws may simply take everything, leaving the widow behind to fend for her-self.

Society expects that the cost of burial ceremony should be handled by the widow in cases where

the deceased was working and it is assumed that the widow has money. These expenses are not limited to the funeral. For example, a widow is expected to erect a tombstone for her husband one year after this death and burial. Sometimes this is done without any financial assistance from her deceased husband's family. Cultural beliefs state that, the soul of her husband will hunt for her if she refuses to what the tradition demands (Nwachuku, 1992).

Thus, many widows are forced into crippling debts by having to pay for the tombstone. The erection of the tombstone of her husband is imposed as a sole responsibility of the widow to make sure that this is done without the help of the in-laws. If her family members are financially buoyant they render support to their daughter. In some cases, the churches try to intervene in area of widowhood rituals but where the church has played such a role in stopping widowhood rituals the African Christian widow still remains handicapped in terms of finance and property inheritance.

In that instance, if the widow is not gainfully employed, she is thrown into penury, which goes against Christian principles. Some widows are sent back to their parents' home with nothing and thus forcing them into a miserable life. This situation makes her family members to often abandon her and she becomes like a destitute in her own family and clan.

Psychological Trauma of Widowhood

The most painful void left by the death of a spouse is felt after the funeral of the deceased, when relatives have departed and the bereaved is alone. In many instances the bereaved becomes pre-occupied by memories of the deceased, sometimes even talking to the departed person as though he were still alive and right there. The widow is not only isolating herself from the living but is making it harder for herself to face the reality of the spouse's death.

Bloom (1992) identified the signs of mourning process to include crying, depression, and difficulty in sleeping. Nearly half of those interviewed claimed difficulty in concentration, lack of appetite and reliance on such medication as sleeping pills or tranquilizers. Some investigators have attempted to outline the stages of mourning

during bereavement.

A common reaction to widowhood by the widow is the specific stress syndrome of grief. Grief is the complex emotional reaction arising from the loss of a spouse and the attendant difficulties and distress are apt to be very great. Grief consists of a pattern of physiological distress including sighing, shortness of breath, and tightness in the throat, fatigue and loss of muscular strength. The griever is occupied with images of the deceased, often feels guilty about real or imagined slights to the deceased and can be irritable and angry when others try to be soothing. The grief reaction comes in waves, especially when the griever is reminded of the deceased and this grief reaction may last any length from days to years (Potash, 1986).

When the widow reacts to the loss with an initial sense of well-being and then show personality changes like generalized hostility or irritability or sink into a long-lasting depression or develop major physical symptoms like asthma or colitis, they can often benefit from some kind of help in managing their grief. This help can come from non-professional organizations like Widow-to-widow, compassionate friends, family members or from short term psychotherapies or from even the government or community (Potash, 1985). Grief is a normal process and should not be treated as a psychological problem. The direction of the grief reaction and the manner in which a person finally adjust to his loss depends upon the success of the grief work, i.e. freeing the widow from the emotional bondage to her husband and the formation of new relationships. A normal grief reaction may last anywhere from 6 months to 3 years and after that point, it is considered to be detrimental to her functioning effectively.

Stages of Grief in Widowhood in Nigeria

The first stage is that of shock and disbelief which occurs upon learning of the spouse's death. The numbness refers to the person being cushioned from the act of pain. During this stage of shock, the person is unable to accept the loss of a mate. Shock usually continues through the funeral. Emotional release is an acute episodic pain outburst of crying. If a person does not cry during this stage, it may be expressed in other forms such as physical and emotional reactions,

increase in accidents, somatic symptoms, tightness in throat, choking with shortness of breath, need for sighing, empty hollow feel, lack of muscular power, problem with digestive system, ulcers, colitis, slight sense of unreality.

Feeling of emotional distance from people, sometimes people appear shadowy or very small, during the stage of impact, three quarters of the widows experience recoil - looking back to the way it was with their husband. This experience of recoil is expressed by means of: pain, anger at her husband for leaving her, guilt as a means of punishing herself for being angry at her husband for dying or for leaving any unfinished business such as doing things you could have done or should have done, but did not.

Due to confusion and preoccupation with the deceased husband, the widow finds it very difficult to shift her thoughts away from him.'

The widow experiences restlessness, identifies with the things her husband liked such as renewing his magazine subscriptions and making foods he loved most (Abolarin, 1997), feels like there is nothing to live' for and nothing seems worthwhile. Thoughts of suicide may be prevalent here and she may respond to others with irritability and anger as she is faced with the fear of being alone forever.

Property and Widow's Inheritance

According to Kirwen (1980) among majority of the Igbo, after the death of a woman's husband, she would be expected to surrender all the man's properties, including bank accounts to the relations for appropriation. She would, in some communities, be expected to take an oath that, she had not concealed anything from the family members. In some communities, the woman would be accused of masterminding the husband's death even where it is very apparent that he died a natural or accidental death. Hence, the widowhood rites would begin by making the woman to pass through "acid" tests such as "drinking bitter water", swearing in a shrine, drinking the water used to birth the husband's corpse or going to a "T junction" to bath, returning home naked by 2.00am. It is believed that, if she survives any or a combination of these, then she is free from the guilt of causing her husband's death. The above notwithstanding, the property of a deceased man

among the Igbo passes to his siblings rather than to his wife and children who are left un-regarded or are often ejected from those properties. It has been suggested that, the humiliating and almost inhuman ordeals to which the Igbo woman is subjected during widowhood rites are intended to subjugate her and deter her from ever laying claims to her husband's properties. The Yoruba respondents, on the other hand revealed that, after the death of the husband, his wife or wives would be expected to observe the community-based widowhood rites. Thereafter, the leaders of the extended family would constitute themselves into a committee to share the man's properties among his children and close kits and kin where he had only one wife. This is called "Olori ko kori"- i.e. an individual basis. However, where he had more than one wife, the properties are shared on the basis of "onidi judi", that is, on the basis of the group of children each wife has. Clearly, in Yoruba land, a deceased man's properties belong primarily to his children and can be extended to his close kin but the wife/wives have access to their late husband's properties only through their children. Among the Igbos and the Yorubas, a barren woman has no rights to the late husband's properties and their widowhood rites are less rigorous (Lesswall, 1987).

Problems the widow must deal with are numerous. However interestingly enough, attention to the problems a widow faces is seldom given much recognition in widowhood research. If one does come across any references to widowhood problems, it is generally of a statistical nature, little if any description of the problems accompany the statistics. Throughout the literature research, the only problems of widowhood mentioned were loneliness, unfriendly friends, feeling like 5th wheel, finances (Eienberg, 1976).

CONCLUSION

Majority of Nigerian widows are not educated and fighting for their legitimate rights becomes a big problem to them even when their husbands died as wealthy individuals. To get the financial and material support from the late husbands' families to cater for the family daily needs like food, clothing, medical bills and school fees becomes difficult for the widows. The children end up hawking and remain illiterate for the rest of their lives because the bread winner is dead.

The widows' financial situations have major effects on their adjustment to widowhood. They will most likely have a major decrease in income and, therefore, need to find some other means of support. For many of the widows, there will be a forced change in economic status, which may then reflect itself in a change in social status. In addition, management of finances is often a new experience and a problem for the adjusting widows. More often than not, the widows experience a major decrease in income since the husbands were the main breadwinners and their abilities, income or pension was not transferable to their wives upon their death.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that, solution to the problems of widowhood should concentrate on economic and social transformations as well as some reasonable forms of adjustment rather than concentrating on the individual treatment of widows. Therefore, this study proposes that, a survivor's benefit scheme be introduced for the peasants, the self-employed and widows in the private sectors. The existing provision under Decree No. 102 of 1980 which covers only widows in the public sector should be revived to include every person. The amount of money paid as survivor's benefit should be capable of sustaining the widows and children until children become adults. Widows who have no children but are of marriageable age should be encouraged to re-marry. The burden on the widows can also be lessened by introducing free and compulsory education, a national health-insurance scheme that would take care of the health of the widows and surviving children, and a guaranteed employment to any widow with requisite qualification. A housing policy that should favour widows and dependent children is necessary. Social workers in governmental and non-governmental agencies can help widows in many ways. At psychological and individual levels, they can help widows to resolve continued psychological trauma of the irreparable loss of their late husbands. They can be helped to accept the social reality in which they have found themselves. Social workers can also organize self-help groups that would assist widows in their social adjustments.

Social workers can also help widows to claim their welfare rights where they are entitled to but

are being denied or delayed. Most importantly, since widows' problems are located in the social organization of the society, social workers can play advocacy roles by fighting for change in the welfare rights of the widows for their benefits. In fact, the social action or reformist approach is the method that social workers have been known for long. But we must hasten to contend that reformist approach through the provision of financial assistance to the widows without transforming the economy and all other social services would be inadequate.

Widows can hardly face a situation of high school fees, medical bills, housing rent and transportation costs. Thus, social policy for the widows should aim at transforming the society and making these services accessible to the lowest person. There is need to review existing laws and grants as well as the sole right of inheritance of deceased husband's property, including landed property, to the widows. At present, widows are discriminated against and denied the right to inherit their deceased husband's property in many parts of Nigeria.

It is indeed agonizing and pitiful that we still witness every day the incidence of a husband's property being snatched away from the widow. What happens at the death of a husband is to accuse the widow of her husband's death. And while she is still crying over her loss and trying to sort out herself over the accusation, her husband's property is being shifted somewhere unknown to her and before she realizes what has happened, the property is no more hers. This is what happens daily in our "civilized" society.

For the fact that, widows highly depend on their husbands for everything when they were alive, it is suggested that, the Nigerian economy be restructured in such a way that women would be self-dependent. The economy should make every provision to encourage women to have other means of livelihood rather than depend on their husbands. Education should be made free and compulsory at least for all females (women). They should also have the right to gainful employment. The customary way people responded in giving assistance to widows should be revived. The Leverage system of marriage which is almost dead in many Nigerian cultures should be encouraged to help in social adjustments of the

widows.

The implementations of the above suggestions, however, cannot be feasible under the present dependent and socialist regimes in Nigeria unless it is structured in such way that, the marginalized classes of the society like widows are given attention. Their socio-economic condition, exploitation, dehumanization and dependency should be addressed in a proper manner that gives them hope and sense of belonging, otherwise, the pains and challenges of Nigerian widows will remain a mirage which neither traditional grief consoling therapy alone nor government intervention can resolve.

The government should establish association of widows, whose primary objectives will be basically on the rights and freedoms of widows. Attempts should be made to explain the practice in their sociological and cosmological context. There should be the presence of dynamic diachronic studies aimed at showing how widowhood practices have evolved or changed over time. This may be explained by the impact on the indigenous African culture by the two great world religions (Islam and Christianity) in addition to colonialism. Roles and political rights of women should be neglected or tempered with. It should receive major attention, and a subject like widowhood practices should never be neglected. Widows should be allowed to possess their possessions and not the other way round. Moreover, since it is said that culture is dynamic, the society should put a stop to these ill cultural practices against widows so that they will have a sense of belonging and as well dwell in a peaceful atmosphere. Finally, Nigerian women should fight collectively in order to put a stop to these dehumanizing traditions.

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