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THE CHALLENGE OF WIDOWHOOD IN IGBOLAND OF NIGERIA: AN IN-DEPTH EXPLORATION

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ABSTRACT

The issue of widowhood and the practices against widows globally have received condemnation from all that are concerned. Igbo land has come to forefront in this issue due to the plight of the widows in Igbo society. This study therefore explores the challenges of widowhood in Igbo land of Nigeria. The sources and nature of data for this study are purely secondary, which were analysed qualitatively through descriptive research design. The study relies on the Social Exclusion Theory for the purpose of theoretical analysis. One of the findings of the study shows that the challenges widows face in Igbo land include emotional, physical, sexual, child up-bringing, in-laws, and financial challenges. It is the opinion of the study that these challenges of widowhood in Igbo land and of course, in any other traditional African society are against the plan, purpose and will of God for widows. It is argued that going by Igbo traditional system, the inhuman practices against widows may not stop. Hence, it is recommended among other things that Christian organisations and governments in Igbo land and Nigeria at large, should take it upon themselves to preach against and protect widows against the unjust cultural practices and stress the equality of all human beings before God.

Keywords: Challenges, Widow, Widowhood, Igboland.

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INTRODUCTION

Marriage, conceived as a divine union, aims to nurture profound relationships. However, life's transience inevitably severs these bonds. In Nigeria's Igboland, mortality is viewed as an unavoidable reality, often blamed on human malice or supernatural forces. This deep-seated conviction prompts traditional Igbo communities in Anambra, Enugu, Abia, Ebonyi, and Imo states to employ ancient investigative methods, including divination and trial-by-oath rituals, to unravel mysterious deaths (Mezieob, Mezieobi, & Iyamu 2011). These rituals may involve symbolic purification or confrontation with the deceased. Despite widows comprising a substantial portion of Africa's female population, comprehensive research remains elusive, as noted by Potash (Potash, 1986). Consequently, existing knowledge on widowhood practices lacks depth and context. Scholars have yet to explore these customs within their sociocultural and cosmological frameworks, leaving significant gaps in understanding (Afigbo, 1986). Prejudices against women, including those surrounding widowhood, are deeply ingrained in many cultures, consistently undermining women's dignity and rights across Africa (Chukwu-Okoronkwo, 2015).

The modern Igbo society is a complex, evolving entity, shaped by diverse external factors that have disrupted traditional cultural norms (Korieh, 1996). Historical events like the transatlantic slave trade, British colonization, and the 1914 amalgamation of Nigeria's northern and southern regions have profoundly impacted Igbo culture. Additional influences include global economic ties, missionary work, education, and significant conflicts such as World Wars I and II, Nigeria's independence, and the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War (1967-1970). These factors have created a unique cultural landscape.

When a marriage ends due to death, the surviving partner enters a period of widowhood, as noted by Ifeanacho (2023). The transition from life to death is a universally significant event, marked by distinct rituals across cultures (Oliobi et al., 2001). Both Christian and non-Christian communities observe specific customs and practices to honour the deceased and support the grieving.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In Igboland, the cultural norms surrounding bereavement disproportionately affect women, particularly those left vulnerable by the loss of their partner. Widowhood imposes significant economic, social, and emotional burdens, exacerbated by limited financial resources and educational opportunities (Oreh, 2006). Prolonged social ostracism, sometimes lasting months or even years, further exacerbates the challenges faced by widows, with devastating consequences for their children and the broader community.

This study aims to provide an in-depth examination of the complexities surrounding widowhood in Nigeria's Igboland. Research highlights the deeply ingrained nature of widowhood, shaped by cultural traditions, economic factors, and societal norms (Mezieob et al., 2011). Despite the Igbo people's receptiveness to change, certain customary practices persist, including those related to widowhood (Korieh, 1996). Notably, many cultural beliefs and practices surrounding widowhood ceremonies remain relatively unchanged in modern Igbo society.

Throughout this exploration, it is essential to consider the broader societal context in which these traditions operate, acknowledging the intricate interplay between cultural heritage and contemporary realities.

METHODS

The data for this study were collected from secondary sources by reviewing content and documentary evidences relevant to the study. Research design was descriptive, which were analysed qualitatively.

THEORETICAL UNDERPIN

Social Exclusion Theory

The theory of social exclusion sheds light on the systemic barriers that prevent individuals from accessing fundamental rights and opportunities, spanning economic, social, and occupational dimensions (Mayes, 2001; Mayes et al., 2001). Key indicators of social exclusion include financial strain, unaffordable basic necessities, substandard housing, poor health outcomes, limited social connections, and job dissatisfaction (Eurostar, 2001, as cited in Silver & Miller, 2003). Hills (1998) defines social exclusion theory as a sociological framework that examines persistent, multidimensional deprivation resulting from disempowerment and alienation.

This theory's multidimensionality is highlighted by Walker (1997) and Duffy (1995), encompassing material resource deficits, inadequate social engagement, cultural and educational capital shortages, limited access to services, and power imbalances. In the context of widowhood, Oreh (2006) reveals how widows face systemic exclusion through disinheritance, material resource scarcity, reduced social participation, and impeded community contribution. This nuanced understanding underscores the complex, interconnected nature of social exclusion and its profound impact on widows' lives, characterized by sudden powerlessness, limited access to resources, and social isolation.

CONCEPTUALISATIONOF WIDOWHOOD

The word widow, from its Old Saxon origin *widowa* and its Sanskrit vidhava as presented in the Dictionary of Etymology (2000), is connected with the idea of being lonely and solitary. From there, it trickles down to the Latin vidua meaning widow. Its Latin verbal form viduare meaning ‘to deprive’, and the adjectival form viduus-a-um meaning ―deprived, bereaved, as presented in Cassell’s Latin Dictionary (1968) go, clearly denote the status of a widow/widower as one deprived of her husband or his wife by death.

There are several milestones in the life of a woman which are referred to as adult passages. According to Lamana & Riedman (1991), these include marriage, the birth of a first child, wedding anniversary, the arrival of the first grandchild and widowhood among others. A widow is a woman whose husband is dead and does not remarry. She can equally be referred to as a woman who has become single because her husband died and she remains unmarried. A woman becomes a widow when the man with whom she had planned the present and the future life is no longer available to share, shape the hopes and the dreams of years ahead. She becomes helpless as she commences a lone journey full of uncertainties of life. She is seen as a liability, powerless, voiceless and vulnerable.

Boulding (2009) has noted that a widow is like a melancholy bird that sits wailing all night, increasing her distress without redeeming features. She can also be seen as a woman who is done with her wedding affirmation of “till death do us path”. This situation gives birth to widowhood. Hence widowhood can be described as a bye-product of every enduring marriage which ends with a spousal (husband) bereavement. Again, a widow according to the Encyclopaedia of Death and Dying is a woman (young or old) who formally contracted her marriage under the Customary Marriage Act or any religious Act and lost her husband to death but did not re-marry (2008).Following such a tragedy in most African societies, the

woman resigns into a group of marginalized, powerless and voiceless invisible beings called widows (Nnodim, 2012).

The term widowhood is the state or period of being a widow. Oreh (2006) observes that widowhood involves a physical break in the family relationship and it is ranked by widows as the most stressful and devastating event in life. This is because widowhood does not only involve the loss of the role of a wife to the husband but also the loss of a person most supportive of the woman, the person who has played a central role in the woman's life, the father of her children, the family breadwinner and the companion of the woman. This transition from wifehood to a widow happens so suddenly and swiftly that in one minute a woman who is a wife transits to a widow. It is at this moment that she starts to experience all the widowhood practices under discussion. Odunze (2005) gives an apt description of widowhood as an unwanted and horrible period that women pass through in life. Widowhood is an awful period for any woman whose husband has died.

THE CHALLENGE OF WIDOWHOOD IN IGBOLAND OF NIGERIA

Widowhood is a transition stage from one marital status to another state after the death of the husband. This has come with a lot of challenges especially in the Igboland. Like Subapradha and Subramanian (2022, p. 61) rightly observe that

> Even today, entering into widowhood is more hazardous, painful and humiliating to women than to a widower because of the discrimination, ritual sanctions of the society against the widows. With the result, widows not only suffer with social and economic problems but also face many psychological consequences, loss of self and identity, loneliness, self-alienation, self-estrangement and in many cases, deprivation causing emotional disturbances and imbalance.

Most of the empirical literature have focused attention on the physiological and psychological implications of widowhood on the woman (Strobe, Strobe & Schut, 2011), while other discussed the approaches to reduce the negative effects on the mental health of the widow (Gumà a Fernández-Carro, 2019).

Other studies on widowhood (Mezieobi et al., 2011) have explained in Igbo land it comes with some painful traditional practices, such as social subjugation, which the widows pass through the burial of their late husbands. This makes Osita, Njoku and Uwaoma (2001), Kolo (2002) and Lannap (2005) to conclude that widowhood in the life of the widow is a period of grief and pain, marginalisation with some accompanied by emotional deprivation, forceful seizure of property and cultural seclusion. Other studies by Balogun (1989) and Okoye (1996) as cited in Odo, Onyishi and Abah (2007) have discussed the inhuman practices against widows in Igbo land to include seizure of property and possibly estranging the widow from means of livelihood.

The challenges of widowhood in Igbo land in this study will be discussed emotional challenges, physical challenges, sexual challenges, child up-bringing challenges, the challenges from in-laws, and financial challenges.

Emotional and psychological/physical challenges

Nwaoga et al. (2021) have observed that widows in Igbo land face emotional and psychological challenges, which come inform of stress, depression and fear because that come from the late husband family members. Iwuh (1998) writing on the psychological challenges widow face come from some cultural practices. For example, when the widows are subjected to undergo certain trauma, which include taking a bath with or drinking water

that is used for washing the corpse of the husband, shaving her hair, restricted from going to the farm or market or engaging in any other activity until six months after her husband is buried.

The emotional and psychological challenges according to Oreh (2006) manifest inform of shock, grief and mourning, sadness, sorrow, anxiety, denial, fear, anger, guilt, loneliness, sleep disturbance (insomnia), tiredness, weight loss, loss of appetite, boredom, hostility, depression, restlessness, frustration, confusion, bitterness and isolation. While the physical challenges manifest in form of some health issues to include cold numbness or faintness, ringing in the ears, hunger may be forgotten, lack of concentration or decreased reaction time, tears, high blood pressure, low blood pressure, chest pain, dryness of the mouth, a lump in the chest or throat, and insomnia (lack of sleep).

Sexual challenges

The sexual struggles faced by widows in Igbo land stem from unmet sexual desires, as sexuality encompasses emotional intimacy, physical affection, and tender connections previously shared with their spouse. A woman's overall well-being and health are intricately linked to her sexual needs and fulfilment (Oreh, 2006).

Child up-bringing challenges

Child up-bringing borders on parenting and this time parenting done by a single parent (widow) (Oreh, 2006). Omartain (2001) has explained that parenting is woman’s best job, but at the same time causes her the greatest pain; fulfilling and also frightening. Child up-bringing by a single mother is quite depleting and exhausting.

The challenges from in-laws

In Igbo culture, a woman's marriage extends beyond her husband to encompass his entire family. However, this cultural expectation often turns against her when her husband passes away, as in-laws exploit this belief to mistreat and exploit the widow (Oreh, 2006). The traditional practices in Igbo communities frequently subject widows to severe hardship and oppression at the hands of their in-laws, as vividly depicted by Osofisan (2004). Moreover, many widows face dispossession and neglect from their husband's male relatives, who deny them access to inherited land and property, leaving them vulnerable and disenfranchised (United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women, 2001).

Financial challenges

Widows in Igbo land face with financial challenges, which come in form of the changing times and expectations in the course of taking care of herself and her children (Oreh, 2006). According to (Korieh, 1996), generally, widows have greater financial responsibility for themselves and their children than they did as wives.

CONCLUSION

The paper has identified the level of unwholesome inhuman practices against widows in Igbo land, which have been challenges to their survival and achieving the purpose of their existing even without husbands. These challenges have cumulated to some sort of human rights abuse as enshrined in the Constitution of the federal Republic of Nigeria (1999) as amended. It is on this note that Mezieobi et al. (2011) have stated that “the essence of protection of fundamental human rights is to ensure social freedom, equality, and justice, and to reduce discrimination against persons in a socio-political environment.” It is also concluded in this paper that the challenges faced by widows in Igbo land, and of course, in any other human

society is totalling against the will of God, and therefore must be condemned by all and sundry.

The cultural expectations imposed on widows in Igbo communities are particularly harsh, involving physical hardship, emotional instability, and socioeconomic trauma. For instance, widows are often required to undergo humiliating rituals, such as drinking the water used to wash their husband's corpse or being locked up with the body. These practices are not only dehumanizing but also perpetuate inequality and violence against women.

To address these issues, it's essential to promote women's empowerment through education and economic support. Additionally, stricter laws and enforcement of human rights laws can help eradicate harmful widowhood practices. Ultimately, condemning these inhumane practices and advocating for the rights of widows is crucial for creating a more just and equitable society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

i. The widow of the 21st century in Igbo land has greater advantage and opportunities of receiving justice than her counterpart a couple of years back. It is therefore, recommended that widows should assert their rights in a most civilized manner (Oreh, 2006).

ii. It is also recommended that “religious groups in Nigeria should take it upon themselves to preach against the unjust cultural practices against women and stress the equality of all human beings before God” (Nwaoga, et al., 2021, p. 8).

iii. It is further recommended that “respect for human rights and the dignity of man must be promoted in the practices of our traditional culture, especially with reference to widowhood rituals (Evaristus, 2023, p. 192).

iv. No matter the widow’s particular circumstance(s), it is also recommended that widow’s financial challenges must arise and must be addressed (Oreh, 2006).

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